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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

The Silver Bride

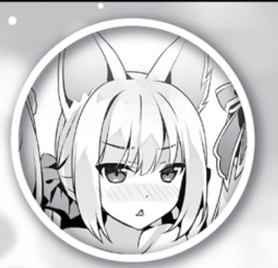
Rio was sandwiched between Aishia and Dryas, each holding onto an arm of his. He had a rather uncomfortably strained smile on his face.
Aishia wore her usual absentminded expression, whereas Dryas' pleasant smile was truly impressive.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Latifa nodded happily. This time, Miharu was able to smile happily, and the painful stirring in her chest quieted down a little.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

SPIRIT FOLK VILLAGE



Sara
Silver Werewolf Girl

Orphia
High Elf Girl

Alma
Elder Dwarf Girl

Arslan
Werelion Boy

Vera
Silver Werewolf Girl & Sara's Sister

Dryas
High Class Spirit of the Spirit Folk Village

KINGDOM OF BELTRUM

Celia Claire
Daughter of a Count and Rio's former academy teacher. On the verge of an undesirable political marriage.

Latifa
Werefox Girl & Former Slave. Reincarnated from another world and fondly calls Rio "Onii-chan."

KINGDOM OF GALARC

Liselotte Cretia
Daughter of a Duke & President of the Ricca Guild

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Rio
A boy reincarnated into another world with the memories from his previous life. His current priority is to secure Miharu, Aki, and Masato's safety.

Amakawa Haruto
A young man who was Rio's previous life as a Japanese university student. Miharu's childhood friend and Aki's half brother.

Aishia
The contracted spirit that was sleeping within Rio. Is apparently an upper high class spirit, but has no memories.

Ayase Miharu
Haruto's childhood friend and first love. Doesn't know that her savior Rio is the reincarnation of Haruto.

OTHER WORLDERS

Sakata Hiroaki
Young man summoned from another world as a hero.

Sendo Aki
Haruto's half sister and Masato's stepsister.

Sendo Masato
Bright and honest stepbrother of Aki.

Prologue: Latifa's Secret Diary 2

It is springtime.

Five months have already passed since I started writing in my diary. Today's weather was clear. A little too chilly to wear thinner clothes, but the gentle rays of sunlight were shining down.

In contrast, however, my heart was instead in a cloudy state... And I know the reason why.

I discovered that the people who used to be so important to Onii-chan have appeared before him.

I know about them, because Onii-chan himself told me about them over three years ago.

Onii-chan and I revealed to each other that we had memories of our past lives, and while I was surprised at the time, I also felt really happy. I heard lots of stories about Onii-chan's previous life, including ones about those people.

For example, Onii-chan had four people in his family, and other than his parents and little sister, he also had a female childhood friend who was practically family. His parents divorced when he was little, and he had to part with his mother, sister, and that childhood friend, too. After that, he lived with his father until he became a high school student, and he always remained in love with that childhood friend...

I haven't asked Onii-chan directly, but I think those people are very important to Onii-chan right now. Because when Onii-chan was talking about them, he looked so fond — yet somehow lonely.

However, Onii-chan asked me not to reveal anything

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about his previous life to those people, and I cannot understand the reasoning behind that. Just imagining myself in Onii-chan's shoes makes my heart hurt. At the very least, I think it'd be difficult to pretend like everything was OK. Being unable to inform your most precious people of your existence… it must be very painful. Especially if you had never thought you'd see them again.

In that regard, I must be very fortunate right now: I was able to meet the person who used to be most precious to me once again when I was reborn, and have him know about my former self. That is a very fortunate thing indeed.

But what about Onii-chan? How is he feeling right now? Isn't it painful for him? When I think about Onii-chan like this, my heart aches.

I'm worried about him… but that's only half the reason. I'm anxious, too.

I wonder if Onii-chan can find peace and quiet with me, in the same way that he's become *my* source of solace. That's why I'm scared of those people coming to the village. Somewhere in my heart, I'm deeply terrified that those people will become more important to Onii-chan than I am. I'm so scared of seeing what Onii-chan's true feelings are, and it leaves me anxious. I'm a coward.

The bad part of me is absolutely terrified.

That's why, when Onii-chan departed from the village today, I sulked as I clung to him. In order to assert my place next to him, I hugged him super tightly. Then, Onii-chan hugged me even more gently than usual, patting my back softly.

As I was filled with relief, I noticed my cowardice, and felt greatly ashamed of my weakness. Even though I was worried for Onii-chan, I still needed to depend on him in the end. Even though I had told myself that it was my turn to do something for Onii-chan, after all that he's done for me…

That's why I'm reflecting. I have to think about the

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future… That's what I decided.

While I'm panicking like this, the situation is continuing to move forward. In two weeks, Onii-chan will bring those people to the village.

I can't sulk anymore. I promised myself when I first started this diary that I would no longer be timid, that I would become someone who can proudly call herself Onii-chan's little sister. That's why I have to think about what I can do for Onii-chan.

Because I'm worried about Onii-chan. Because I'm his little sister. That's why I won't sulk anymore.

If they're people precious to Onii-chan, then they'll be precious people to me, too. I will face them proudly. I'll become super close to them, and on top of that, I'll work my hardest not to lose to them, fair and square.

That's what I've decided.

This is a declaration of my resolution.

Although it makes me nervous wondering what kind of people they are… Even so, I want to see Onii-chan soon. I want to meet Onii-chan's special people.

So, when Onii-chan brings his precious people to the village, I'm going to be the first one running to welcome them. As Onii-chan's current little sister, I won't give this role up to anyone.

I'll be waiting, Onii-chan!

— Diary, Day 153.

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Chapter 1: A Chance Meeting and Welcome

It was Year 1000 of the Holy Era, in early spring.

A giant eagle-like bird was soaring through the skies above the spirit folk village; it was Ariel, the contract spirit of Orphia, the high elf girl. Four girls in total were riding on Ariel's back.

"Orphia, faster! Faster!" Latifa, the werefox, urged Orphia to make Ariel move faster.

"Got it. Ariel, if you'd please," Orphia ordered Ariel, smiling with amusement. With a great flap of her wings, Ariel accelerated her flight speed.

"Hey, Latifa — there's no need to rush. It's not like Rio's going to run away," Sara, the silver werewolf who was also riding on Ariel, said with an exasperated face.

"But I want to be the first one to greet Onii-chan!" Latifa pouted her lips cutely.

"There he is." The dwarf girl Alma, who had been silently watching the ground from Ariel's back as they moved, spotted the people they were looking for and pointed toward them. There in the distance stood five boys and girls — Rio and his guests.

Onii-chan. And those people must be... Latifa enhanced her vision with spirit arts and focused her eyes on all of their faces. Rio and the others must have noticed their approach, as they were all looking back.

"The peach-haired girl seems to be Lady Aishia. Ariel is drawing back a little," Orphia said in awe.

"My Hel is also acting a little weird. Is it because of Lady

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Aishia? Alma, how about your Ifritah?”

“Same here. I’m not surprised — she *is* a humanoid spirit. Her rank really must be high.” Sara and Alma also seemed to feel the abnormality from their contract spirits residing within them in spirit form.

As they were speaking, Ariel closed the distance to Rio’s group. Once they arrived in the skies above him, they began to slowly circle the area and lower their altitudes.

Latifa fidgeted impatiently while waiting for the landing, then jumped off Ariel’s back while they were still a fair distance above the ground.

“Ah, hey! Hold it right there, Latifa! Good grief!” Sara immediately noticed and yelled for her to stop, but Latifa had already landed on the ground. She adjusted her balance and set her eyes on Rio before she took a small breath and burst into an energetic dash.

“Welcome back, Onii-chan!”

“Whoa, there. I’m back, Latifa.” Rio caught Latifa gently, killing the force of her impact. Miharu, Aki, and Masato stared at the two of them, having been somewhat taken by surprise.

“Ehehe,” Latifa grinned shyly. Ariel landed right beside them, and Sara, Orphia, and Alma all jumped down to the ground.

“Geez, Latifa. You know it’s dangerous to jump from so high up, right?” Sara scolded Latifa with a hand placed against her hip.

“It’s fine! I made sure to enhance my physical body beforehand.”

“Geez! ...Oh, forgive my rudeness!” Sara was about to launch into one of her lectures when she noticed the eyes fixed on her. She bowed her head in a fluster, then cleared her throat with a small cough. She smiled brightly to hide her embarrassment and addressed Miharu and the others.

“Welcome to the spirit folk village — we are pleased to

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have you here.”

Rio chuckled. “This is Sara. She’s a werebeast of the silver wolf variety and from one of the more prominent families in the village.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Sara,” she greeted with a faint blush to her cheeks.

“This is the high elf Orphia, and next to her is Alma, a dwarf. Both of them are from prominent families in the village, just like Sara,” Rio continued.

“Nice to meet you.”

“It’s a pleasure.”

Orphia and Alma both bowed politely in greeting.

“Umm, my name is Ayase Miharu. Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Miharu replied rather nervously.

“I’m Sendo Aki. Nice to meet you,” Aki greeted awkwardly.

“Whoa… They’re real.” Masato let out a squeaky noise as he stared at Sara and the others in a captivated daze.

“…You introduce yourself properly, too,” Aki said, poking Masato in the head roughly.

“O-Oww, that hurts. What’s your problem, Aki?” Masato complained as he held a hand up to where he was poked, but Aki didn’t bother responding to him.

“Please accept my apologies — this is my foolish brother, Masato. As you can see, he is lacking in many areas, but he doesn’t mean anything by it. I would appreciate it if you treat him with some level of tolerance,” Aki explained and bowed her head at Sara and the others in embarrassment.

“Fufu, that’s all right,” Orphia nodded with a giggle. Rio looked at the three Japanese visitors and introduced them to Latifa, who was still in his arms.

“This is Latifa. We’re not related by blood, but she’s my beloved little sister. She should be the same age as Aki.”

“I’m Latifa. Onii-chan’s little sister, and a werefox. Pleased to meet you.” Latifa adjusted her posture and bowed

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to them with a bashful smile, then raised her head and glanced at Miharu and Aki's faces.

"Hello, Latifa. It's wonderful meeting you," Miharu said, returning Latifa's grin.

"...Yes," Latifa nodded hesitantly, enchanted by Miharu's smile.

"Now, I'll introduce this girl to Sara and the others. You may have figured it out already, but this is my contract spirit, Aishia. Aishia, can you introduce yourself to them?" Rio asked.

"Hello. I'm Aishia," she said simply.

"It's an honor to finally make your acquaintance, Lady Aishia. On behalf of all the spirit folk, we welcome you to our village." Sara, Orphia, and Alma all kneeled respectfully where they stood. In response to their reverent reaction, Aishia tilted her head curiously. Miharu and the others also seemed taken aback.

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With a faint smile, Rio explained why the spirit folk trio were acting with such humility. “Like I told you before, the spirit folk consider high-ranking spirits that have a humanoid form to be sacred, and worship them. You’re one of those humanoid spirits, Aishia.”

“I don’t need to be treated so stiffly,” Aishia said, shaking her head quietly.

“Well, I know you can’t just agree with that so easily, but it’d be nice if you could take appropriate measures for that. For now, please stand up,” Rio said to Sara’s group, the faint smile still on his face.

“…Okay.” The villagers nodded, standing hesitantly. “Umm, then… May I call you Aishia?” Latifa asked Aishia without faltering.

“Geez, there you go acting all overly familiar again. Try and follow the spirit folk ways for once…” Sara sighed tiredly and expressed her disapproval, but—

“Latifa can call me whatever she likes. I don’t mind if you call me Aishia,” Aishia answered nonchalantly.

“Oh.” Sara was immediately at a loss for words.

“Hmm… Then, Aishia, is it?” Latifa cocked her head and hummed to herself.

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Yay! I’m glad to meet you, Aishia!”

“U-Umm, Rio. Are you sure this is okay?” Sara looked at Rio worriedly for confirmation.

“It’s fine. Miharu even calls her Ai-chan.” Rio gave Sara his stamp of approval with an amused smile.

“…Really?” Sara stared at Miharu fixedly, as though she was seeing something awe-inspiring.

“Huh? Sh-Should I not have been doing that, by any chance?” Miharu asked nervously, trembling with a start.

“You’re fine. Aishia herself told you it was fine, so please respect her opinion.” Rio shook his head cheerfully as he consoled Miharu.

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“Umm, by the way. When they say ‘Rio,’ are they talking about you, Haruto?” Aki suddenly asked, having been listening silently for a while. At the same time, Latifa’s ears twitched at the sound of Aki calling Rio “Haruto.”

“Ah, that’s right. I still have to explain the circumstances around that properly.” Rio scratched at his head with a troubled expression, unsure of where to start. Latifa watched him silently at his side.

“I mentioned it indirectly when I first met you guys, but ‘Haruto’ is the alias I am using while I’m active in the Strahl region. My real name is the one Sara and the others have been calling me — Rio,” he explained.

Sara raised her hand hesitantly. “Erm, may I ask why you need to use two names separately?”

“It goes back to several years ago, before I first visited this village. I was involved in some trouble with the royalty and nobility of a certain kingdom in Strahl. They made me into a scapegoat for a crime I did not commit. In the end, they even put out a wanted notice for me,” Rio replied uncomfortably. At that, Latifa’s expression fell with an apologetic look.

“Huh?!” The other girls all widened their eyes. Only Aishia remained indifferent to his story, having known what happened already.

Ah! Sara and the other spirit folk girls recalled how they had been told of Latifa’s past as an assassin who had tried to attack Rio. Expressions of understanding fell across their faces as they began to suspect that the incident may have been related to how Latifa and Rio had met.

“Well, I know it doesn’t sound very believable…” Rio said with a troubled face after a moment, the faces around him appearing dumbfounded.

“Of course we believe you. We’re just shocked at how horrible it must have been.” Sara shook her head in a fluster.

“It really is horrible. Is that wanted status still in effect even now?” Alma asked with a frown.

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“Thank you for your concern. I’m not sure if the warrant is still active… I haven’t returned to that kingdom yet, after all. However, the crime wasn’t a light one, and its statute of limitations wouldn’t have run out after a mere few years. Even if they aren’t actively searching for me, I think it’d be best to consider the crime as still pertinent.” Rio shook his head slowly.

“I see. So that’s why you decided to use two names and change your hair color with a magic artifact…” Sara said, comprehending his words with a conflicted expression.

“It’s also because black hair simply attracts attention in the Strahl region,” Rio added. “But its true purpose is to act as a precaution if that warrant from back then is still effective. So… I don’t mind what you call me while I’m in the village, but Miharu, if you and the others ever return to Strahl with me, I’d like to ask you to only call me ‘Haruto’ there,” he said lightly, clearing the heavy mood. Masato cocked his head.

“Hmm… You’re still Haruto to me, though. It doesn’t feel right to call you Rio at this point, and switching names would just confuse me if we ever go back to Strahl, so I’m going to stick with calling you Haruto!” he said with a grin.

“I’d like to continue calling you Haruto, too, since I’m already used to it,” Miharu agreed with a smile.

“Umm, then… me too.” Aki also nodded hesitantly.

“He has always been Rio to us, so it’s a bit curious to see him being called Haruto,” Sara said with a giggle.

“But it strangely suits him, don’t you think? His gray hair is lovely, too,” Orphia said, smiling cheerfully.

“It’s true… Rio’s aura is a little different when he has gray hair instead of black hair, but they both make him look handsome,” Alma agreed.

“Ah, I think it suits him too, you know?! When I said curious, I didn’t mean it was weird… Wait, what’s that look for, Alma?” Sara hurriedly added on to her earlier comment,

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but when she spotted Alma's triumphant expression, she stopped to question the meaning behind it.

"Oh, no reason. Don't you think it's time to lead everyone now?" Alma smiled with a puff of laughter and calmly changed the subject. Orphia was giggling, too, as Rio's guests watched their exchange with deep curiosity.

"I-I know that! And what are you laughing at, Orphia? We're going to lead everyone now. Hurry up and let them on Ariel's back." Sara's cheeks reddened with embarrassment as she urged Orphia into moving.

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The entire group took to the skies and headed toward the giant tree house that was used as the village's town hall. Once they landed in the square just before the town hall, Miharu and Aki timidly dropped down to the ground, whereas Masato leaped down with enthusiasm.

"That was amaaazing! Flying is so fun! The village buildings are amazing too!" he shouted in high spirits.

Beside him, Aki shot him a look of distaste at his childishness, but she also greatly enjoyed the scenery during their flight, so she wasn't one to talk, either. Miharu chuckled at the sight of the two.

Just then, particles of light gathered at the entrance of the town hall, taking on the shape of a beautiful woman. "You've arrived. I've been waiting." The woman who had materialized was Dryas, the spirit of the giant tree.

"Great Dryas — you're here." Sara, Orphia, and Alma bowed at Dryas respectfully.

Dryas approached Aishia and spoke to her with a radiant smile. "Yes, I felt the presence of a powerful spirit appear within the village barrier. I flew over immediately, knowing it had to be Rio's contracted spirit. You must be the one. I'm Dryas."

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“I’m Aishia. Hello, Dryas,” Aishia replied in a monotonous voice.

Dryas stared into Aishia’s face with a look of contemplation. “Hmm. You really are a spirit I don’t know, then. Not to mention your… Well, it’s fine. Let’s continue this conversation inside. You’re meeting the elders, right?” she asked, then immediately turned on her heel and faced the town hall.

“All right. Follow me, everyone.” Led by Sara and the others, the party headed toward the top floor of the town hall.

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Ten minutes later, on the top floor of the town hall in the council room, Aishia and Miharu’s group received a warm welcome from the elders of the village. The three head elders began with simple introductions.

“It is a pleasure to have you in our village, Lady Aishia. On behalf of all the spirit folk, we welcome you from the depths of our hearts.” One of the head elders, the high elf Syldora, stood up from his chair and addressed Aishia sitting in the guest seat with reverence. The other elders also stood and lowered their heads at Aishia out of respect.

“Thanks,” Aishia said shortly.

With a small smile, Syldora turned to greet Miharu, Aki, and Masato sitting beside Aishia. “Children from another world, you have done well coming this far. We welcome you, too.”

“Y-Yes! Umm, thank you very much for agreeing to look after us. We are truly so grateful… I’m not sure what to say.” In contrast to Aishia’s composed manner of gratitude, Miharu bowed her head nervously.

“T-Thank you very much!” Aki and Masato bowed awkwardly after Miharu.

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“Hahaha, there’s no need to be so formal. This gathering is to merely exchange simple greetings and to see each other in person. I’m sure you have heard from Lord Rio already, but as long as you to agree to several of our conditions, we will guarantee you a peaceful life here in our village. We will leave formal arrangements for another day.” Syldora gave a good-natured smile as he spoke to the nervous group of humans.

“Hmm. We were told you would be otherworldly folk, but you look just like humans.” The head elder dwarf, Dominic, gazed at Miharu and the others with curious interest.

“Hey, don’t stare at them with your fierce mug. You’re scaring the guests,” Ursula scolded Dominic jokingly.

“W-What?” Shocked, Dominic was at a loss for words. The other elders in the room laughed in amusement, and Miharu and the others followed suit. The air the room became much lighter. Sensing that, Dominic let out a dramatic sigh to show that he wasn’t upset.

“Now, there’s no use in continuing this chatter with the boring elderly folk. Sara, you and the girls can guide them to their lodgings,” Syldora said, turning to address the group.

“Understood. Everyone, follow me.” Sara nodded respectfully before swiftly making her way over to Miharu.

“Huh? Is that all?” Miharu asked in surprise, expecting the meeting to go on for a little longer than that.

“Indeed. Tonight was merely a modest greeting of sorts. Perhaps you could tell us stories of your other world some other time? But first, you should get some rest.” Syldora nodded warmly.

Miharu bowed her head deeply. “Y-Yes. Thank you very much!”

“There’s something I’d like to ask Lord Rio and Lady Aishia. Could the two of you remain here a little longer?” Ursula asked.

Rio nodded immediately, before looking over at Sara and

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Latifa. “Of course. Everyone, I’m leaving Miharu and the other guests in your hands. You too, Latifa.”

“Sure. You can leave it to me, Onii-chan!” Latifa puffed out her chest proudly.

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After Sara and the spirit folk girls led Miharu, Aki, and Masato out of the room, Ursula spoke up.

“My apologies, Lord Rio. Lady Aishia. There are some more complicated matters we’d like to discuss with you, so please keep us old folk company a little longer.”

“Of course, it’s nothing to apologize for. If anything, we should be thanking you for your consideration,” Rio replied with a bow. He figured that the reason why Sara and the others were sent to lead Miharu’s group away was because the topic of the discussion to come was highly confidential.

Right now, the only ones remaining in the room were Rio, Aishia, the council of elders, and Dryas, the spirit of the giant tree. All were more than qualified to know what was being discussed, and to keep the information to themselves.

“So, what did you wish to discuss?”

“Hm. While there’s a lot to cover, we’ll start with Lady Aishia first. Great Dryas, if you’d do the honors?” Syldora immediately cut to the chase, seeking further instructions from Dryas, who sat next to Aishia.

“Let’s see. First, it’s clear that Aishia isn’t any spirit that I know of. From what I’ve heard through the elders, Rio’s mentioned a few odd points here and there, too… Aishia, is it true you don’t have any memory of what kind of spirit you are?”

Aishia nodded. “Yup.”

“That’s what I found odd. Normally, a spirit would retain their memories from before they ranked up to a humanoid state, but she doesn’t have any memories, not even of her

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name. It seems she has the awareness and intellect of a humanoid spirit, but her sense of self seems strangely weak… I suppose that's because of the amnesia?" Dryas contemplated out loud.

"…I'd like to ask you something about that. Are all spirits capable of climbing the ranks up to a humanoid state, all while keeping their memories from the lower and middle ranks?" Rio asked.

"That's a difficult question. I can only tell you based on what I've seen myself, so this may not be the correct answer, but not every spirit can climb to a rank higher than they're already at. There are many components and conditions required," Dryas replied. "I'm not entirely certain with regard to the memories, either, but I know I can't remember anything from when I was a low-ranked spirit myself. Spirits are normally said to be mana that hold a clear sense of self, but low-ranked spirits are basically the equivalent of a human baby in terms of cognizance. I only have memories from after I became a middle-ranked spirit. Although, I couldn't wander very far from the tree I resided in at the time, so I basically spent every day sunbasking," she added, looking wistful as she spoke.

"Thank you for your answer. In other words, Aishia should have had a stage before she became a humanoid spirit, and she should have memories of that period."

"That's right. I should add that once a spirit reaches the upper-middle ranks, it takes many long years to strengthen their sense of self and gain individuality. Just like me," Dryas said, smiling proudly.

"I see…" Rio nodded in understanding, then looked at Aishia. She indeed had a personality that was quite different compared to Dryas'. Unlike Dryas, who freely expressed her emotions, Aishia didn't show many of her emotions outwardly.

"That's why… How should I put this? Aishia… She almost

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seems like a young spirit that just ranked up from being a low ranking spirit to a middle ranked one. Her rank as a spirit is high, but her sense of self seems weak and irregular. Unless she's actually a really eccentric girl beneath that exterior… but she isn't, is she?" Dryas said thoughtfully, looking at Aishia with an incline of her head.

"Am I?" Aishia tilted her head, too, looking at Rio.

"Who knows. But, I think you're already very charming as you are." Rio laughed in amusement.

"Thank you, Haruto." Aishia smiled faintly; Dryas watched their exchange.

"Fufu, it seems like your contract relationship is going well. That's a good thing. I don't have anyone I'm contracted to, so it makes me a little jealous," she said pleasantly.

"Indeed, she does seem to have opened to Lord Rio a fair amount," Ursula agreed. "However… Does she mean Lord Rio when she says 'Haruto'?"

"Yes. Due to certain circumstances, I've been calling myself Haruto while in the Strahl region. I informed Sara and the others earlier, but this is a good chance to inform everyone here, too." Rio said, then repeated everything he had told the girls earlier. The elders listened to him in silence, only speaking up once he had finished his explanation.

"I see. So Lord Rio had that kind of past…" Ursula murmured with a conflicted expression. The other elders wore similar looks on their faces.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep it a secret all this time, but I didn't think it was a good story to spread around, so I kept quiet about it. With the circumstances as they are right now, you deserved an explanation… but it isn't a very positive story, I admit. Please do not let it weigh down on you," Rio apologized with a guilty expression. "There's one more thing I need to explain to everyone that might not be very pleasant… It's the reason why I was able to

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communicate with Miharu. I'd like to ask you to keep what I'm about to say as confidential as possible — is that all right?"

The three head elders looked at each other with wide eyes. "…Are you sure? There's no need to force yourself to explain anything." Syldora asked, watching Rio's expression.

"I'm not forcing myself into anything. However, it isn't the type of explanation I expect to be taken seriously, so you may find what I'm about to say to be rather strange. If Miharu, Aki, and Masato hadn't appeared, I would have never told anyone about this," Rio said with a troubled expression.

"Does this mean you've told the otherworlders this, too?"

"Yes. The need for an explanation was unavoidable due to the course of events. That is why I think it would only be right if I gave everyone here the same explanation, since they will be under the care of your village from now on. I omitted my reasons from our talks the other day, but I am willing to explain everything today, if everyone so wishes."

"I see… Everyone, it is as you have just heard. If Lord Rio discusses this with us, it will be strictly forbidden to speak of this outside of this room. Those who cannot vow their silence should leave this room immediately," Syldora said. Once he confirmed that not a single person had left their seat, he spoke up again, smiling at the elders. "Then it is assumed that everyone present has sworn to strictly adhere to the aforementioned conditions. Those who break their word… Well, you all know what happens. Great Dryas, you are fine with this, too?"

"I don't mind. I have neither the interest nor gossip partner to do so," Dryas agreed with a nod.

"It seems we are all in compliance, Lord Rio. Now, would you please tell us what you have to say?" Syldora asked, looking at Rio.

"Of course. I am greatly obliged for your consideration."

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Rio bowed deeply, then began to explain the reason why he could communicate with Miharu in Japanese — because he had memories of his own previous life — but only to the extent of what he already told Miharu and the other Japanese visitors. Specifically, he told the elders how he had awoken to memories that weren't his own when he was a young child, and that those memories were set in a world that was coincidentally the same as the world that Miharu had been living in. He hid the fact that he had a connection to Miharu in his previous life.

"That's all," Rio said, wrapping up his explanation. The elders had remained silent for the entire duration of Rio's speech, but the moment he was done, they all inhaled at once — as though just remembering to breathe.

Syldora was the first to open his mouth. "Hmm. That is indeed an unexpected tale to believe... but it is the truth, no?" After a heavy moment of thought, he accepted Rio's words as truth.

"...You believe me?" Rio's asked in amazement, having not expected anyone to believe him so easily.

"It's because you're the one saying this, Lord Rio — that is enough for us to believe you. Not to mention, it seems to be true that you were able to communicate in their language. Even if you were to lie about it, there would be no need to make up a story this nonsensical to cover it up." Syldora nodded with a wry smile.

"However, it is indeed nonsensical. I can understand why Lord Rio wants us to keep this truth confidential... Being reborn with your memories is something I have never heard of before in my long years of life." Ursula said, also with a wry smile.

"Right..." Rio acknowledged how impossible it sounded.

Dominic placed a hand by his chin. "Hmm. Great Dryas, have you ever encountered anyone in a similar situation as this before?" he asked her, since she was the oldest living

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being in the village.

Dryas shook her head bluntly. “I haven’t. As far as I know, no one like that has ever appeared in this village before.”

“Is that so… Sorry, Rio. I was hoping there’d be a precedent that could provide you with hints, but alas.” Dominic shrugged his shoulders at the hopeless situation.

Rio shook his head with a smile. “No, it’s still of great use to me to know that no one like this has openly appeared throughout the long history of the world. I wondered if it was possible my memories of my previous life had something to do with how I suddenly found myself contractually bound to Aishia without realizing it, but I’ll set that thought aside for now.”

He already knew of someone who had memories of their previous life, and another that he highly suspected to be the case, but he decided not to reveal that right now.

“Hmm… If only we at least knew what kind of spirit Aishia was… All I can say for certain is that she isn’t a part of the only high rank spirit network I know. By the way, what kind of element do you specialize in, Aishia?” Dryas suddenly asked.

“All of them,” Aishia replied calmly. At that, the elders all stirred noisily. Even Dryas, the one who asked the question, widened her eyes in astonishment. Rio was the only one who was confused, wondering why everyone was reacting with such surprise.

Dryas repeated her question nervously. “…Umm, I’m not sure I heard you correctly. Did you just say you specialize in all types of spirit arts?”

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While Rio met with the village elders and the Great Dryas, Miharu’s group was being led outside the town hall by the spirit folk girls. In front of the town hall was a wide and

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spacious square that doubled as a playground for the children. They had missed them earlier, when they had first arrived, but there were young boys and girls running all over, now.

"*The scenery was amazing to see from above, but it's just as amazing from below, too. The spirit folk really are incredible… They even made a tree house that looks like this. It's almost like a skyscraper,*" Masato said in awe as he looked up at the tree house that was used as the town hall.

He had spoken in Japanese on the spur of the moment, but Orphia was able to pick up on the general gist of Masato's statement through his reaction. She smiled pleasantly.

"Fufu, the giant tree of Great Dryas is several times the size of this one, you know?" she said in the Strahl tongue.

"Huh? W-Wow, even more… than this? Umm, I would love to see it, if that's not too much trouble." Sensing that he was the one being spoken to, Masato blushed, his reply awkward.

"Wipe that sloppy look off your face… Speaking like you're someone you're not." Aki said, looking at Masato with disgust in her eyes.

"W-What's your problem, Aki? This is my normal way of speaking," Masato objected in a high-pitched voice, making Aki sneer with a laugh.

"You say that, but your true colors are showing already."

Meanwhile, Sara and the others hadn't quite picked up on what was happening yet, so they looked curiously to Miharu for an explanation.

"Ah, umm. Masato is actually quite shy around strangers. I believe he was a little nervous when talking to Orphia…" Miharu explained.

"M-Miharu, you don't have to tell them that!" Masato yelled in embarrassment.

"It's not quite *shyness* around strangers… Masato's weak

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to cute and beautiful women older than him — even more so when they're strangers he's meeting for the first time," Aki explained bluntly.

Taken aback, Masato tried to drown out Aki's voice. "Wah! Stop it, Aki!"

However, it seemed that the spirit folk girls were able to hear her anyway, as they started giggling.

"Ahaha, I see. Should I be saying 'thank you,' then?" Orphia smiled bashfully.

"Ah, geez! I'll never be able to show my face again!" Masato covered his face and squatted down where he stood; he wanted to dig a hole in the ground and hide in it, but the gesture only made Sara and the other girls giggle even harder.

"What a funny child," Alma murmured, smiling as she looked at Masato.

"You'll be fine if you can make jokes like that. No one here will be bothered if they never see your face again anyway, so don't worry about it. Come on, you're blocking the way, so stand up already," Aki cracked a merciless verbal whip at Masato, who was still groaning with shame.

"Ugh, I know that. ...Wait, why are all of those people looking at us?" Masato put on a bold front and stood up, before noticing the village children staring at them from afar; their ages appeared to span from five years old to the early teens.

"They're probably curious about you, since we rarely have visitors from outside the village," Sara commented.

"Looks like their morning classes ended and they're using their time for training and exercise. Vera and Arslan are there too," Alma said, pointing at the children.

The silver werewolf Vera and werelion boy Arslan stepped out from the crowd and approached the group. "Sister! Are these three people the guests Rio brought along?" Vera asked Sara with a friendly smile.

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Out of consideration for Miharu and the others, she was speaking in the common language of Strahl instead of the language of the spirit folk.

“That’s right. We’re giving them a tour of the village.” Latifa nodded with a smile.

“I knew it! They have black hair just like Rio, so I could tell right away. It’s nice to meet you! I’m Sara’s little sister, Vera.” Vera faced the humans and bowed politely as she introduced herself.

“Hello there. My name is Miharu, from the same hometown as Haru… as Rio. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Miharu returned without missing a beat.

For the record, the truth as to how Miharu and the others had come from another world was information that was known only by the council of elders and certain individuals. Because of that, Miharu had to explain that she and the siblings were all humans from Rio’s hometown. In addition to that, she decided against calling Rio “Haruto” in this situation, since the explanation would be complex.

When Vera saw Miharu’s smile, she widened her eyes and nodded. “Y-Yes. Wah… Isn’t she beautiful, Arslan?”

“D-Don’t ask me!” Arslan shouted with embarrassment from his spot beside her, having been put on the spot. Seeing him flustered, Sara giggled.

“This boy’s name is Arslan. He’s Vera and Latifa’s friend,” Sara said, introducing him to everyone on his behalf.

“…I’m Arslan. Nice to meet you,” Arslan said with a turn of his head, cheeks faintly reddened with a blush.

“I’m Masato. I’m twelve years old.”

“My name is Aki. I’m one year older than Masato, so I’m thirteen.”

“That makes Aki the same age as me, then. I love making new friends my age. I hope we can all get along well,” Vera said with a carefree smile.

“As you can see, the two of them can speak the Strahl

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tongue, too. They're good friends with Latifa, so I'm sure you'll have many chances to interact with them in the future. Please be good friends with them," Sara added.

"Of course," Aki and Masato said, nodding in unison.

"By the way, where is everyone heading to now?" Vera asked with a tilt of her head.

"We're about to take Rio's guests to the house they'll be living in while he finishes his talk with the elders," Alma explained.

"Aww, that sounds nice. I wanna go, too!" Vera replied with jealousy.

Sara shook her head sternly. "You can't. You two have training after this, don't you?"

"That's right, Vera. Today's the day Uzuma's teaching us, so it'd be a shame to miss it. Let's go and visit them later?" Arslan said impatiently, trying to persuade Vera against leaving.

"Hmph, fine then." Vera backed down reluctantly.

"Hey hey, when you say training, what kind of training is it?" Masato asked with great interest.

"Combat training, of course. Our instructor is the warrior chief of our village, you know?" Arslan answered proudly.

"Combat training, huh…" Masato murmured in awe.

"I use two-handed swords," Arslan stated. "Can you use any weapons, Masato?"

"No, I've never had any kind of training like that before… But I'm interested in it," Masato replied hesitantly.

"Huh, so you want to learn how to use a sword?" Aki asked in surprise, eyes widening.

"Y-Yeah. We don't move around much studying all the time, after all."

"Hmm…"

"W-What? You got a problem with that?"

"As long as it's not dangerous, I suppose… What do you think, Miharu?" Aki suddenly turned to Miharu with a

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contemplative look.

“Huh? Umm, I wouldn’t like it if it was dangerous, but I’d want to respect Masato’s choice, too, I think? Ah, but make sure you get permission from Haru… I mean, Rio,” Miharu replied.

“Rio would probably make the ideal instructor. If Masato has the fighting spirit to learn swordcraft seriously, then it may be a good idea to discuss it with him properly,” Sara said in a somewhat resolute tone.

“So, would you say that Haru… that Rio is actually really strong?” Masato inquired, making sure his tone was polite.

“Yes. Not only is he strong in pure close combat abilities, his combat with medium and long range spirit art attacks are clearly strong enough to be the very best of the village,” Sara replied proudly.

“Sara’s even fought with Rio before,” Alma said with a huff of laughter.

“T-That goes for you, too!”

Just as Sara was about start arguing back in a fluster, Orphia stepped in with a gentle smile. “All right, all right. You two have both been working hard in your training, so make sure you show your growth to Rio again later in a proper manner.”

“Maybe I’ll get Rio to face me some time. If Masato learns how to use a sword, we can eventually spar each other, too. I’ll train you up to par,” Arslan said, challenging Masato with a smile.

“You still have a ways to go yourself. It’s far too early for you to be training a beginner,” Sara said to Arslan with an exasperated look.

“Haha, I’d love to spar, though. I’ll try asking Rio, but I’ll be looking forward to our match one day… umm… Arslan!” Masato said somewhat shyly, and Arslan nodded energetically in return.

“Yeah, I’ll be waiting!”

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After bidding farewell to Vera and Arslan, the spirit folk girls led their three new guests to their new lodgings. The house — a tree house supported by several trees — was located toward the center of the village, several minutes from the town hall.

“You will be living in this house from now on,” Sara said to Miharu, Aki, and Masato after the party stopped in front of the house.

“…That’s amazing. Is it really okay for us to live in such a wonderful place?” Miharu asked nervously as she looked up at the tree house.

“Of course,” Sara agreed. “This house was vacant to begin with—”

“—as it’s the house Onii-chan and I used to live in together,” Latifa cut in happily.

“Hey. Putting it that way makes it sound like you and Rio lived here alone. We lived here, too, remember?” Sara corrected with a slightly sulky tone. Miharu and the others were all rather taken aback, their eyes wide; Masato especially, who was most surprised of all.

“Umm, is something the matter?” Sara asked hesitantly, noticing the change in expression of the three humans.

“…When you say ‘we,’ do you mean Miss Orphia and Miss Alma, too?” Masato asked quietly. He still seemed rather resistant to acting overly friendly with Sara’s group and couldn’t quite call them by just their names yet. He would surely get over that soon.

“Yes,” Sara replied, nodding curiously.

“T-The five of you?” Masato asked once more in a high-pitched voice.

“Y-Yup,” Sara confirmed, now faltering.

“Wow… I’m jealous,” Masato muttered to himself.

Beside him, Aki furrowed her brows unhappily; with a

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cold smile pasted on her face, she dug her nails into Masato out of view from Sara and the others.

“What? You’ve been living in a home with a skewed gender ratio until now. Do you have something to complain about?”

“O-Oww, that hurts, Aki,” Masato complained painfully, but Aki quickly withdrew her hand and turned her head away with a huff, ignoring him.

“Fufu, the two of you are close.” Latifa laughed with amusement, watching the two of them.

“No, we’re not. We’re always fighting.” Masato shook his head tiredly.

“That just means you’re close enough to fight,” Alma said with a faint giggle.

“Yup yup, just like Sara and Alma,” Orphia agreed with a cheerful smile, then casually directed her glance at Alma and Sara.

“…Or maybe not. I take that back.” Alma blushed red and muttered with embarrassment.

“Geez, what are you saying? Let’s go inside already,” Sara said tiredly, walking off briskly towards the front door of the house, though her cheeks were also faintly red from the side. Miharu realized Sara was blushing from shyness and smiled to herself.

Latifa tugged on Miharu’s sleeve. “Hm? What’s wrong, Latifa?” Miharu asked gently, smiling at her.

“Umm, may I call you Miharu?” Latifa asked, staring straight up into Miharu’s eyes with a look full of anticipation.

Miharu’s eyes widened for a moment before she happily agreed. “Of course you can.”

“Ehehe. Thank you, Miharu. Tell me lots about Onii-chan!”

“Umm, sure… But wouldn’t you know more about Haruto than I would, Latifa?”

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“Mm… that might be true, but I kind of want to hear what Onii-chan looks like from Miharu’s point of view, too. I also want to learn lots about you, and I’d love for you to know more about us, because I want us to become friends quickly,” Latifa said, smiling innocently.

Miharu also gave a relaxed smile. “Fufu. If that’s the case, then… gladly. Let’s get along, Latifa,” she said, nodding.

“Yup! Let’s, Miharu!”

As Latifa and Miharu stayed in place to converse, Sara and the others had already moved to the front door.

“Miharu, Latifa. Is something the matter?” Sara asked the two girls.

“It’s nothing. Hey, when you’re done giving the tour of the house, I want to have tea with everyone! Are there any snacks?” Latifa held Miharu’s hand and started to tug her along as she spoke.

“Yup, there are,” Orphia nodded.

“But only a little, it’s almost time for lunch,” Sara added without missing a beat. Miharu watched their exchange from the side and giggled.

Latifa is such a good girl. Sara and the others are so kind, too.

Miharu had hidden her concerns about moving to the village, so it was a relief to see everything going so smoothly. At that moment, it felt like something good was about to happen. It was just a feeling she had.

After that exchange, Miharu, Aki, and Masato were given a tour of the house interior and chatted with the others until Rio and Aishia finished their discussion. Later on, Vera and Arslan visited as well, forming a close group of similarly aged kids with Latifa, Aki, and Masato. Before long, the time for the banquet was upon them.

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Evening reared itself; lead by Sara and the spirit folk girls, Miharu, Aki, and Masato were taken to the town hall once more.

They stepped inside the large dining hall on the bottom floor to find countless round tables set up, each one stocked to the brim with delicious dishes in a buffet-style dinner.

“Oooh, amazing! It looks so good!”

“That looks great! I’m so lucky I get to join in!” Both Masato and Arslan exclaimed at the dishes before them. The two boys got along well and hadn’t taken long to hit it off as friends.

“Masato, stop acting so childishly. It’s disgraceful. The families of the important people in this village prepared this for us today, so you should at least mind your manners,” Aki warned.

“Aki talks like she’s your mom,” Arslan whispered to Masato.

“Right?” Masato whispered back. “She’s always trying to tell me off for every little thing. I can’t stand it.”

“Hey, I can hear you,” Aki said to them, the smile on her face twitching.

“Th-There, there, Aki. Today’s a welcoming party for you, so there’s no need to act all formally, either,” Latifa consoled her, with Vera stepping in as well.

“That’s right. Please relax and make yourself at home.”

Next to where the five younger ones had gathered, Miharu was talking to Sara, Orphia, and Alma. The four of them had also warmed up to each other, but there was still some awkwardness that remained.

“So, you prepared such a wonderful party for us too…” Miharu was looking around the dining hall with widened eyes and a hint of surprise.

“It seems like most of the upper families of the village will be attending. Great Dryas and Lady Aishia will also be present, so it looks like those in charge of food preparation

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went all-out. That being said, everyone's just happy to have an excuse to party, so there's no need to be nervous, Miharu," Alma said, easing Miharu's worries. It seemed like she was looking up to Miharu with the same respect she showed for Sara and Orphia.

"It's exactly as Alma says. Once the alcohol comes out, it'll become much noisier," Sara said with a bittersweet smile.

"Ahaha. You might be surprised seeing it for the first time," Orphia added with the same smile on her lips.

Alma looked around the hall. "Looks like everyone's arriving now."

Residents of the village had been streaming through the door continuously for a while now.

"If it isn't Lady Sara, Lady Orphia, and Lady Alma. Good evening." The werecat girl Anya appeared and called out to Sara's group.

"Good evening, Anya," they replied with a smile.

"Is this cute girl the rumored visitor? The one from Rio's hometown."

"Yup, this is Miharu. Miharu, this is Anya, the werecat."

"It's nice to meet you, Anya. My name is Miharu. Pleased to make your acquaintance." Miharu bowed courteously.

Anya stepped closer to Miharu and shook her hand, smiling with amusement. "Nice to meet you, Miharu. Hmm... The girls around Rio are all so cute."

"Eh, no, that's not..." Miharu blushed in a fluster.

"The demand for Rio is rather high, after all. Feel free to come to me if you need someone to listen to your troubles." Anya grinned mischievously, probing for details.

"N-No, umm, I'm fine... I think?" Miharu ducked her head in embarrassment.

"Anya. Stop teasing Miharu," Sara sighed, warning Anya.

"Okaaay," Anya drew out, then spotted a friend of hers. "Oh, my friend's here. Miharu, let me introduce her to you. Hey!"

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After that, Miharu chatted with the girls of the village for a while. At the same time, Masato and Aki were also deepening their friendships with the other children that were around their age. The adults of the village watched the younger generation mingling across species with pleasant smiles on their faces.

Once all the guests had gathered, head elder Syldora spoke up. “Now, shall we begin? Everyone, may I ask that you please be silent?” he said, his voice echoing throughout the room; he had amplified his voice with wind spirit arts. The bustling hall immediately fell silent. Syldora, Dominic, and Ursula presided over the dining hall, gathering all the attention of those present.

Once Syldora had the hall’s attention, he spoke with a wry smile as he looked out over those present. “Lady Aishia and Great Dryas will be entering the hall, now. I believe everyone knows already, but this is a reminder not to act too reverently.”

Events like this were always held without social ranks, so a natural laugh fell from the audience as the atmosphere of the hall became less tense.

“I don’t see Haruto…” Miharu muttered as she looked around the hall. Sara followed her gaze, glancing around.

“Yes… maybe he’s attending late?” she said, though the head elder continued to speak without concern.

“Now, if the two of you could please enter,” Syldora said, summoning Aishia and Dryas, who had been waiting outside the room.

Upon closer observation, Ursula and Dominic both had wicked grins on their faces, but no one had noticed as of yet. The doors of the hall had already been opened by people assisting the process, and everyone present — including Miharu, Sara, and the others — naturally had their gazes drawn by the doors. Immediately after, those in attendance stirred with noise.

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While Aishia and Dryas certainly did enter from outside the room, they were accompanied by a third person who had been intentionally hidden away — Rio. He was sandwiched between Aishia and Dryas, each holding onto an arm of his. He had a rather uncomfortably strained smile on his face. Aishia wore her usual absentminded expression, whereas Dryas' pleasant smile was truly impressive.

"Rio?!" Sara's eyes widened as she accidentally raised her voice to the level of hysterics.

"O-Ooh..." Orphia and Alma also widened their eyes in surprise.

The spirit folk villagers present were half-surprised and half-speechless, in awe of seeing two humanoid spirits, Aishia and Dryas, walking together.

"Ahaha. Rio's really something, huh?" Anya's cat ears and tail flickered to and fro as she laughed with amusement.

Humanoid spirits ranked high class and above were practically regarded as sacred beings by the spirit folk; to be accompanied by two such goddesses on each side was an act of the highest honor to the spirit folk — or rather, an act of the greatest amusement to Anya. The three head elders watched the reactions of the attendees and smiled at how humorously their plan had succeeded.

Rio continued to escort Aishia and Dryas until they reached the stage beside the head elders' seats.

"Now that the surprise has been revealed, I'd like to introduce everyone to Lady Aishia, who has come to visit our village today. I'm sure many of you are already aware, but Lady Aishia is Lord Rio's contracted spirit. She was asleep for a long, long time, so her memories are still rather vague, but the chance meeting with a new humanoid spirit is a tremendously auspicious event to our people. That is why we have decided to hold a small banquet in celebration tonight," Syldora said warmly.

"Tonight will also act as the welcoming party for the three

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new friends Lord Rio has brought to us. As our sworn friend, any friend valued by Lord Rio is a friend of ours, too. Let us welcome them to our village lavishly, so that they may enjoy the duration of their stay. Let's see... How about the three of you come up to the stage?" Ursula said.

"Huh?" The three of them flinched and nervously looked around the excited hall. Rio chuckled at their reaction.

"It's all right, Miharu. Please, come this way." He called the eldest, Miharu, up first. She took a deep breath and timidly started walking toward the stage. Once Miharu had started to move, Aki and Masato soon followed.

"Welcome, Miharu," Aishia said to her quietly as she approached.

"Y-Yeah, thanks. There're a lot of eyes on us... ahaha. I might be a little nervous... Uhh..." Miharu said, grinning shyly as she turned to face the room. Once she made eye contact with the rest of the villagers, her face turned bright red, and she bowed up and down. Aki and Masato hid behind her, while the spirit folk villagers watched over the three with warm gazes.

"Gosh, your surprise went too far, Haruto," Masato sighed.

"Sorry, I didn't really understand the progression of things, either. They won't do anything bad to you, so just go along with it," Rio replied with a wry smile.

"B-But I've never stood in front of so many people before. It's pretty nerve-wracking." Even the usually cool Aki was speaking in quite a high-pitched voice. Rio nodded in understanding.

"You can see how they are, so please go easy on them, Syldora," he said.

Syldora laughed heartily and nodded, looking over the room. "Hahaha, all right. Everyone: as you can see, our three new visitors are lovely people. Let us give them a warm welcome, so that they may adjust to life in our village as

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soon as possible. Please, raise your glasses."

The audience raised their glasses in turn, and a waiter came over to Rio and the others on the stage with a tray of cups. Then, once everyone had a drink in their hand, Syldora raised his cup into the air and led the toast.

"It looks like the cups have gone around. Now, to celebrate this wonderful meeting of fate. Cheers!"

The attendees also raised their glasses in an uplifted manner. "Cheers!"

"Alright — it's time to talk, drink, and make merry! The young ones should make sure to use this chance to humbly greet Lady Aishia and the other visitors. Go on."

In order to enliven the banquet, the alcohol-loving Dominic took the initiative; he walked around briskly and relentlessly addressed the younger villagers, urging them toward the stage. Then, young boys and girls of the village — those acquainted like Sara's group and those unacquainted — all started to move toward Aishia, Miharu, and the other visitors.

Sara and the other girls approached Rio first, offering to take on an assistant role for Miharu's sake. "Leave Miharu's support role to me. Rio, you support Lady Aishia."

"That'd be a great help. Thank you."

"Yup. All right, Miharu. Come this way."

Sara and the others quickly took charge and led Miharu's group a short distance away from the stage. Having everyone gathered in one place made it hard to manage; Sara probably intended on splitting up the crowd a little this way. Her idea seemed to work, as a decent number of people gathered toward Miharu, Aki, and Masato.

The young children of the village actively started to talk to them, immediately starting a kind of cultural exchange. Thanks to Sara and the spirit folk girls acting as an icebreaker, Miharu and her group weren't as nervous as they could have been. It was a good atmosphere.

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Looks like that side will be fine. I'll have to do my best, too, Rio thought in relief, then braced himself.

"Everyone, feel free to come this way. I will introduce Aishia to you." He invited those who looked eager to talk to Aishia to come closer. While they had set ranks outside of this event, they were still feeling inferior in front of their deity of worship. Then, the youngsters of the village gathered around Aishia, greeting her in awe. Aishia didn't respond with many words, but Rio kept the conversations going well in her stead.

Furthermore, the adults of the village kept the banquet lively during that time, turning the hall into quite the busy place. There were many laughs to be had as time passed.

Just like that, nearly an hour went by in the blink of an eye.

"Fufu, it's turned into a good welcome party. I'm having a lot of fun, too," Dryas said to Syldora and Ursula, who were watching over the banquet in a corner of the hall. For the record, Dominic was still actively heating up the banquet from where he was.

Syldora noticed Dryas' presence and happily addressed her. "It is a great honor to hear that you are pleased, Great Dryas."

Ursula nodded along happily, slowly turning her gaze toward where Rio and Aishia were on the stage. "However, Aishia's identity still remains a mystery... possibly even more so now than before. I thought she may have possibly been one of the upper high class spirits that disappeared in the Divine War, but..." she said a little uneasily.

"Hmm, good point. She does have a lot of latent power within her, I believe. I don't know if it's a side effect of her amnesia, but she doesn't seem to understand how to use her powers properly as a spirit, and I've never heard of a humanoid spirit having aptitude for every element before. If we fought seriously, I wouldn't be able to win." Dryas had a

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rarely seen expression of contemplation on her face as she nodded.

Similar to how people had their own strengths and weaknesses in spirit arts elements, spirits also had elements that they had a higher aptitude for than others. This rule was more prominent in spirits ranked middle class and higher — that was common knowledge among the spirit folk, until now.

This was because a low class spirit — even if it didn't have any strong or weak elements — could bloom in a particular element upon ranking up in class. From there, it would become a spirit that specialized in that element. It wasn't as though middle class spirits and higher couldn't use spirit arts of other elements, it was simply that their efficiency in those other elements was far worse compared to their specialty.

While humans who could use a number of different spirit art elements and people who could use all kinds of spirit art elements were a rare phenomenon, there had never been a confirmed case of a middle class spirit or higher. At most, there would appear the rare spirit with multiple elements that they had enough aptitude to specialize in at once. Presently, Dryas herself was a high rank spirit that mastered the element of earth, and even the six former upper high class spirits were said to each have their own specialty element.

And so, neither Dryas nor the village elders had expected the response from Aishia claiming to specialize in every element, so their earlier conversation had truly been shocking to them.

"For the Great Dryas to give this much praise, both Lady Aishia and Rio must be tremendously exceptional… Perhaps even more than the former upper high class spirits that vanished…" Syldora said with great awe for Aishia.

"The six upper high class spirits that formerly stood at the

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top of their element ability, and the single spirit that is at least high class who has the aptitude for every element… I wonder which is the more peculiar existence.” Dryas smiled, showing a glimpse of her great curiosity.

“Well, it seems neither Lord Rio nor Lady Aishia recognize their own peculiarity yet,” Ursula said, laughing heartily.

People and spirits had elements they were strong and weak in. It was extremely rare for anyone to be proficient in every element — it seemed that Rio had a slightly warped understanding with regard to the history of spirit arts, as he wasn’t quite aware of how rare that occurrence was amongst humans and spirits.

In reality, low class spirits aside, any spirit middle class or higher would — without exception — form a specialty in a particular element, making it impossible to have aptitude for every single element. But knowledge of spirit ecology like this was a rather specialized field, which was why it was understandable that Rio had misunderstood until now.

“I’ll teach him all the knowledge he needs to know about spirits during his stay in the village this time. It’s been a long time since my curiosity has been piqued like this, after all,” Dryas said, watching Rio and Aishia as they continued to chat with the villagers.

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The welcoming party for Aishia and Miharu’s group continued late into the night, but their lively time together was over in a flash.

“Now, let’s go home!” A slightly drunk Sara led the way happily, leading Rio and the others to the house they were moving into. They stepped out of the town hall and the cool spring night breeze wrapped around their bodies.

“Phew, I ate and drank to my heart’s content!” Masato

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said with a small burp as he patted his stomach.

“Geez, you’re like an old man, Masato,” Aki sighed. Miharu and Latifa laughed in amusement at the siblings’ exchange.

“By the way, I heard that you guys would be staying together during our time in the village…” Rio said to Sara and the others.

“Yes. The head elders have ordered us to stay together, saying it’d be the fastest way to get them used to life in the village. Ah, we’ve already checked for Miharu’s approval on this.”

“Of course, I’ll be staying with them, too!” Latifa said, clinging to Rio’s arm tightly.

“I know.” A soft smile pulled at Rio’s lips as he gently petted Latifa’s head.

“Fufu, it reminds me of those days we lived together. I’m looking forward to it… I’m sure it’ll be so much fun,” Orphia said, smiling pleasantly.

“It might get much noisier this time around,” Sara said with a sigh, making Alma laugh teasingly.

“Sara’s been looking forward to it for a while, now.”

“A-Alma, too. Anyway… All the rooms have been prepared already, so once we get to the house, we’ll decide who sleeps where.” Sara turned away with embarrassment, then increased her walking speed; her faintly blushing cheeks were probably because of the alcohol.

“Ehehe, I want to try sleeping in the same room as everyone so we can all talk together,” Latifa said with a cheerful smile.

“Huh? E-Everyone?” Masato replied in a fluster, but Aki shot him down.

“Everyone other than you, of course.”

“D-Don’t say that! Why is it okay for Haruto to do that, then?!” Masato whined in a pathetic voice, making all the girls laugh in good humor. They continued to chat noisily

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together and arrived at the house within a few minutes.

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Interlude: Talented Woman, Liselotte Cretia

Fast-forwarding a little bit in time, in the Strahl region…

The blue-haired noblewoman, Liselotte Cretia, was hosting four important visitors to her estate in the trading city of Amande — the city she governed — located in the southwest region of the Galarc Kingdom.

The important visitors were Sakata Hiroaki, the hero summoned into the world three months ago, and three members of Beltrum Kingdom royalty and nobility: Second Princess Flora, Duke Gustav Huguenot, and the noblewoman Roanna Fontaine. Not even Liselotte, daughter to the most prominent lord of the Galarc Kingdom and head of the Ricca Guild — which was renowned even in neighboring kingdoms — could afford to speak out of line in the presence of these guests.

Once Hiroaki and the others arrived in the afternoon, they were first led to the dining room for a meal and introductions. Numerous courses of gourmet foods were served to the delight of not only Hiroaki, but Flora and the others as well. Liselotte acted as the hostess during the meal, keeping the conversation going so that the group had a pleasant time.

Once everyone finished dessert, Flora spoke up. “That was a wonderful selection of dishes. The authentic pasta here is different compared to anywhere else, and that cake for dessert was very delicious, too.”

“Yeah… You must have a really skilled chef here. I never expected to eat pasta in another world, but… this I can say

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for certain: that was the best meal I've had since coming to this place," Hiroaki, who sat next to Flora, said in satisfaction. In all honesty, Hiroaki hadn't expected much from the food in this world, but he was now reconsidering that perception.

"Hero, Princess Flora — I am most honored to receive your compliments. Allow me to graciously thank you on behalf of our head chef." Liselotte bowed her head humbly, showing gratitude with great respect.

"Yeah, you can tell him he's so good that I'd love to scout him as my personal chef."

"I'm afraid that would be a problem for me, but the thought is much appreciated."

"Ah, well, it was good enough to make me consider that," Hiroaki said with a huff of laughter. He had actually eaten two extra servings of pasta, so even if he had said it was bad, it wouldn't have been very convincing.

"Fufu, thank you very much. I had heard that the hero hailed from another world, so I was worried that the meal wouldn't be to your tastes. Your words just now have reassured me," Liselotte said, smiling brightly with relief.

For a moment, Hiroaki lost himself in Liselotte's smile. To hide his embarrassment, he brought up another topic. "Ah, I see. That's good, then. Pasta is the local specialty of this city, right? There's actually a similar food in the world I'm from."

Flora widened her eyes. "Oh my, is that true?" she asked.

"Yeah. We also have lots of other similar plants and animals. Recipes and cooking skills aside, I'm honestly glad to see there isn't that much difference in the food here," Hiroaki replied, remembering all the foods he'd eaten since coming to this world.

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"...You seem to be the same species as us humans, so perhaps there isn't that much difference in our ecosystems?" Liselotte asked, watching Hiroaki's expression carefully.

"So it seems. That being said, there are plants and animals I don't know."

"How fascinating. What kind of place was the world you lived in, hero?" Liselotte asked.

"Well, civilization was a lot more advanced than this world, that's for sure. The country I'm from is called 'Japan,' a relatively advanced country even for my world."

Liselotte's eyes narrowed in the faintest at the mention of that name. "Japan, you say? I have one question about that..."

"Hm? What?"

"Why can you understand our language, hero?"

"...Hm? What do you mean?" Hiroaki tilted his head at Liselotte's question.

"Well, it's just that I find it strange how the language of another world can be used in this world without any alterations," Liselotte said, supplementing her question.

"Oh, I see. That's true..."

This time, Flora was the one to incline her head in confusion. "Umm, what do you mean? Is he not actually communicating in our language?"

"There are a number of theories about the origin of our language, but it is practically impossible for the same language to develop in completely different places. While the common tongue is used widely in the Strahl region nowadays, each area still has its own unique language, not to mention that the hero came from an entirely different world..." Liselotte explained.

Perhaps translation sorcery was cast on him when he was summoned into this world as a hero. I've never heard of sorcery like that before, but that's the only explanation... I'll have to look into it more when I have a chance. For now,

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he doesn't seem to find it strange that several of the Ricca Guild products have Earth names…

"I see… So that's how it is," Flora said, understanding in awe.

"Well, it's not a problem that can be solved simply by dwelling over it. I just found it a little strange, is all. Forgive me for asking such an odd question." Pressing the issue any further would have been rude and held the possibility of arousing suspicions, so Liselotte chose to back down easily without further pursuing the answer.

"No, I found it strange, too. Though I assumed it was a part of the whole other-world summoning cliché, so I didn't worry about it at first." Hiroaki shook his head, unbothered.

"A 'cliché'…?"

"Ah… Other world journeys are really common in the popular novels I often read. When certain parts of those stories get overused, they're called 'tropes' or 'clichés.'"

"Is that right? So the hero is educated in both literature and cuisine." Liselotte placed a hand over her mouth as she smiled elegantly. The gesture would have seemed forced on some people, but it looked more than appropriate for a well-bred girl like her, making her seem very cute.

"Ah, no, not really. But I do believe I've read enough of everything to develop an eye for fine quality. I also have a view on all works of art, not only novels." Hiroaki said in a not at all displeased manner, gloating rather bashfully.

After that, Liselotte continued to cleverly flatter Hiroaki, sometimes directing the conversation to Flora and the others, making the after-meal discussions pleasant. Liselotte was a skilled conversationalist, drawing topic after topic from Hiroaki. They spent nearly an hour like that, until the lone female attendant in the room filled their cups of tea for a third time.

"Oh my, would you look at the time. Talking to the hero was so fun, I was lost in our conversation together," Liselotte

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said regretfully, looking at the clock in the room.

Still wanting to talk more, Hiroaki's face fell. "Ah, is that so? I wanted to talk with Liselotte for a little longer, though…"

"Fufu, thank you very much. However, I heard from Duke Huguenot that there was a matter to be discussed, so we must address that as well." Liselotte bowed her head apologetically to Hiroaki, before turning to bow to Duke Huguenot too. "Please accept my apologies, Duke Huguenot. I was too immersed in the conversation."

"No, no, you were merely fulfilling your duty as a hostess and enlivening the atmosphere. Lord Hiroaki and Princess Flora seem to be satisfied, and I was able to hear many interesting stories as well. There is nothing for you to apologize for." Duke Huguenot smiled brightly and shook his head.

His words were not just flattery; no matter how much of a noble education and upbringing one received, entertaining heroes and foreign royalty would normally be too great a burden for a young noble. However, Liselotte played the role of an entertainer perfectly.

"I am delighted to hear you think so. Thank you very much," Liselotte said with respectful gratitude. Duke Huguenot was astonished by her masterful conduct.

It is amazing that she's the same age as Princess Flora. She's as talented as the rumors say… no, she's even more talented than the rumors. Roanna — who is a year older — is also quite talented, but she would be at a disadvantage when compared to Liselotte, Huguenot thought to himself, glancing at Roanna, who sat with them as Hiroaki's assistant.

"Regarding the matter to be discussed… Shameless as it may be, we have a request to make of you."

Liselotte's eyes widened in a great deal of surprise. "Oh, is that so? What kind of request might that be?"

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Duke Huguenot cut to the chase. “We would like to make a request for your support,” he requested brazenly.

The ability to offer opinions and make requests without cowardice during negotiations was an essential skill for a noble. Being quick to back down because of the mood didn’t always lead to the desired results, and lowering one’s guard carelessly risked being dragged into the opponent’s pace. In a nutshell: being brazen was a noble’s forte.

“Do you mean support for the faction that you’re holding in Marquess Rodan’s territory, Duke Huguenot?” Liselotte asked, showing no particular change of expression. She had nothing to fear, being someone of her position who had faced numerous sly nobles and merchants many times before.

“Yes, that’s right. ...I’d like to take this opportunity to drop all pretenses. Liselotte, how much of our kingdom’s situation are you aware of?” Duke Huguenot asked suddenly, getting to the heart of the matter.

“...If I were to limit my knowledge to confirmed information, then I know the Beltrum army was crushed by the Proxia Empire several months ago. Several strategically located bases and territories were occupied, leading to the reemergence of Duke Arbor’s house after their fall nine years ago. After that, when Duke Arbor pressed His Majesty and Duke Huguenot for responsibility of the defeat, he managed to skillfully seize political power. It was so skillful, it was as though he had arranged everything in advance,” Liselotte explained, speaking eloquently about the facts she had gathered from her information network.

“I see. Considering how much of our country’s situation you have a grasp of, including the unconfirmed information, that is quite impressive indeed.” Duke Huguenot chuckled faintly. Flora and Roanna were both gazing in awe, surprised at how well Liselotte understood their kingdom’s domestic affairs.

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“I am merely a minor noble and merchant,” Liselotte said humbly with a cool smile.

“Hahaha, it makes things much easier if you are that aware of the situation. You’re an intelligent individual… I’m sure you’ve already realized the meaning behind why Princess Flora is here with me, no?”

“…That you are backing Princess Flora in order to oppose Duke Arbor, I suppose?”

To put it another way, King Philip III of the Kingdom of Beltrum had entrusted Flora to Duke Huguenot — but Liselotte purposefully chose not to express it like that.

“That’s right. You may be aware already, but we are secretly in the middle of negotiations with the Kingdom of Galarc for its support,” Duke Huguenot confirmed.

“…There’s one thing I’d like to ask you. Would I be correct in assuming that the hero’s presence here means he has also sided with your faction, Duke Huguenot?” Liselotte looked at Hiroaki in question.

“Yeah, that’s right. Geez… I just wanted to quietly live my life without drawing attention to myself, but apparently the situation surrounding me won’t let me do that,” Hiroaki agreed tiredly and shrugged his shoulders.

I guess it’s certain that he’s the strongly self-asserted type, then? Duke Huguenot must have stirred his true nature well to get him to join. There was still a need to observe his personality further, Liselotte analyzed calmly in her head as she smiled.

“I believe our negotiations with the Kingdom of Galarc will conclude in the near future, making us formally allied. At that time, we would like to request your support,” Duke Huguenot stated.

“I am but one young girl. Wouldn’t it be better to seek my father’s cooperation if you wish for political or military assistance?” Liselotte said, avoiding an answer. In reality, she was only the daughter of a duke, so she had no real

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political or military power outside of her position as Amande's governor.

Duke Huguenot shook his head bluntly. "No, what we seek is financial support."

"What do you mean?" Liselotte asked, her eyes fixed on him.

"As you are the president of the Ricca Guild, I am requesting this of you. Would you be willing to invest your company's valuable resources — funds, goods, and connections — for our sake? You can call this a business negotiation. Of course, you will be duly rewarded," Duke Huguenot stressed the vital point.

The Ricca Guild was an extremely young organization established by Liselotte, but it was already a high-class trading guild famous in neighboring kingdoms. It continuously produced products that captured not only the hearts of nobles, but commoners too, making its financial influence reach far beyond that of a small kingdom. Such a large trading firm was built up in a single generation, by the still-fifteen-year-old Liselotte.

Consequently, Duke Huguenot was certain that having Liselotte and the Ricca Guild as their allies would be even more beneficial than having the support of the Galarc Kingdom.

"...I understand. In that case, as long as you agree to several of my conditions, I will agree to providing you support," Liselotte replied after a pause.

Duke Huguenot's eyes widened faintly. "...That was a rather quick decision. I honestly expected more resistance."

"Oh? The Ricca Guild isn't a charity, after all. If it's a business negotiation with a return for us, then I am willing to invest in it. Please look at these first." Liselotte smiled cutely, then took out several documents; the female attendant waiting beside her immediately carried them to Duke Huguenot.

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“…Oh?” Duke Huguenot ran his eyes over the documents swiftly, before breathing an impressed hum. The document contained the clearly written conditions of the Ricca Guild’s support for the Huguenot faction.

So she saw through our intentions from the start. What truly wonderful talent, Duke Huguenot thought, astonished.

“Hmm. So all that’s left is for us to accept these conditions… Could you allow us some time to carefully consider this?”

“Of course. We can reach a conclusion once you’ve done that. You’re welcome to stay in my estate until you have reached a decision you are satisfied with.”

“That would be greatly appreciated. Then I shall explain the overview of this to Princess Flora and Sir Hiroaki immediately.”

“In that case, a separate room will be prepared for you. Aria?” Liselotte said, addressing the sole attendant in the room.

“Understood. Everyone, please follow me this way.” Aria promptly opened the door of the dining hall and invited Duke Huguenot and the others to step out. Then, after entrusting the party to another attendant waiting outside the room, Aria spoke up again. “She will be the one to guide you there. Please let her know if you need anything.”

Just before he left the room, Duke Huguenot stared at Aria’s face. “…Excuse me for asking, but have we met somewhere before?” he asked curiously.

“…No, I don’t believe so.” Aria shook her head slowly.

“I see. My apologies. Liselotte, I shall see you later. Please excuse us for now,” Duke Huguenot said, seemingly unbothered as he quickly left the room.

Meanwhile, Hiroaki’s eyes were drawn to Aria’s well-proportioned face, but he was urged out of the room by Flora and Roanna behind him.

Thus, once Liselotte and Aria were the only ones left in

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the dining hall, Liselotte spoke up. “Duke Huguenot seemed to recognize your face. Are you sure you didn’t meet him while you were working in the Beltrum royal castle?” she suddenly asked.

“No, I never actually met him.” Aria shook her head disinterestedly. Liselotte didn’t seem too interested either, as she soon changed the subject.

“I see. Well, that’s fine. More importantly, can I ask how the hero looked to you?”

“…He gave the impression of someone who dislikes being restricted, and he strongly desires to stand out, despite what he was saying. If that wasn’t an act, then I believe he’s simply a young man who craves the limelight after obtaining undeserving power so suddenly.”

“Harsh. But accurate,” Liselotte agreed with a wry smile. If he really didn’t want to stand out, then he didn’t have to be the hero. The fact he was sticking his neck into the kingdom’s affairs was proof of that contradiction. Otherwise, there had to be a reason why he had to act as the hero.

He may be easy to handle now, but those types of people are more bothersome to handle when aggravated. Duke Huguenot was probably aware of that, thought Liselotte.

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Chapter 2: New Life in the Village

The afternoon of the day after Miharu and the others began their new lives in the spirit folk village…

Rio held a training sword in his hand as he stood with Sara, Alma, and Orphia, all four of them gathered in the square before the town hall. At the request of Sara and the other girls, they were about to have a sparring match.

Beside them, the winged werebeast and warrior chief of the village, Uzuma, was acting as the referee, while Miharu, Aki, Masato, and Latifa were observing from a short distance away. The children of the village, led by Vera and Arslan, were running over after hearing the rumors of what was about to happen. However, Aishia had gone to visit Dryas and wasn't present.

They checked the condition of the training equipment before their match, warming up lightly first. "Rio, would you be okay with a one-on-three match? I'd like you to check our coordination as a group today," Sara asked as she grabbed a training dagger.

Rio nodded immediately. "Sure, I don't mind. I wanted to practice facing multiple opponents more anyway."

"Hey, is one-on-three a proper match? Sara and the others aren't that strong, are they?" Masato asked Arslan, who stood next to him; they were watching the whole exchange from the sidelines. After the banquet and a night of sleeping under the same roof together, he seemed to have warmed up to Sara and the others enough not to call them "miss" anymore.

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Arslan corrected Masato's misunderstanding rather excitedly. "Stupid, Sara and the other girls are pretty strong, too... But Rio's just too strong." His eyes shined brightly as he imagined the exciting match that was about to unfold before them.

"Really..."

"Like I said before, Rio's strong enough to be the very best fighter in the village. Just watch carefully."

"Y-Yeah. Seems like it's starting now." Arslan's words and the mood in the air seemed to reach Masato, as he nodded rather nervously in return. Right before his eyes, Rio and the girls were facing each other and bracing their weapons.

"Begin!" Uzuma called out, giving the signal to begin the match. Immediately after, Sara's figure all but disappeared as she burst into a run toward Rio.

"So fast!!" Masato, Aki, and Miharu gazed in shock at the speed that far surpassed their imagination as Sara resolutely swung her dagger and aimed multiple attacks at Rio. Her aim seemed to be to pin him in place, as her series of blows placed more emphasis on speed rather than power and precision.

However, Rio managed to avoid those attacks splendidly. He deflected the minimum amount of attacks with his sword, while the rest he evaded lightly with the ways he positioned his body.

"Fuh!" Alma, who had been hiding behind Sara with her small frame, drew near Rio and tried to land a heavy blow with her mace. However, Rio seemed to be expecting Alma's movements in advance, as he stepped back easily to avoid her attack. Alma's mace cut through the air with a sharp sound and bore into the ground; the sound of the soil being pulverized echoed belatedly.

"W-Wow! But wouldn't you die if that hit you?!" Masato yelled, flustered at how Alma's herculean strength didn't suit her small stature.

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“It’s fine! They’ve enhanced their physical bodies. There’s spirit arts for healing, too,” Arslan explained excitedly.

Alma easily swung her blunt mace that didn’t suit her build, attempting to land her attacks on Rio. However, she seemed to be lacking in speed, as he easily evaded all of them. That was where Sara came in; she continued to launch her sharp attacks against Rio, covering for Alma’s wider gestures.

The speed fighter Sara and power fighter Alma — if Rio focused on one of them, the other would come in to back them up, freeing their movements. Their roles were clearly separated, showing splendid coordination. Furthermore, Rio’s mind had to be split across one more opponent.

“I’d like to join the fun too,” Orphia said, politely interrupting them as she fired a series of light bullets she had spread out around her toward Rio. Their appearance and individual force were identical to the low grade offensive magic of *Photon Projectilis*, but their trajectory twisted and turned freely instead of moving in a straight line.

Rio finally burst into a run to avoid the bullets, but Sara and Alma had promptly closed in on both his sides, obstructing his path to safety. At that, Rio immediately stopped evading. He drew the bullets as close to him as possible before stomping down on the ground heavily. No sooner had he done that, a thick dirt wall rose from the ground before him and blocked the light projectiles; he had poured essence into his feet to manipulate the ground with spirit arts.

However, Sara and Alma instinctually expected the fact that he would defend himself and broke into a run right away, closing in on Rio in a pincer attack. Rio glanced left and right, before thrusting his sword into the ground and choosing to brace himself unarmed. His actions even made Sara and the other onlookers a bit taken aback with surprise.

Rio didn’t let that moment of weakness escape him. He

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instantly pulled his sword out of the ground and approached Alma first, moving to intercept her. Alma swung her mace reflexively, but Rio braced his sword sideways and spun his body, using his centrifugal force to swing his sword. Immediately after, Rio's sword clashed with Alma's mace, ringing with a tremendous impact.

Sweat dripped from Alma's forehead. "To think you'd directly challenge a dwarf like me in a test of strength..." Dwarves boasted the highest level of monstrous strength among the spirit folk species, but she and Rio were completely equal in power just now.

"That's because you're a girl. I can't afford to lose in a test of strength." Rio smiled with a chuckle. By effortlessly withdrawing his sword, he cleverly threw Alma off balance.

"Huh? Kya?!"

When she lost her balance, Alma let out a cute sound that was normally unheard from her. She just barely managed to swing her mace, but Rio stepped deeply into her personal space and reached a hand out to gracefully parry her mace, snatching it and flinging it far away.

"Uh?!"

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Alma felt her center of gravity drop with a jerk. Apparently she had fallen straight into Rio's throwing trap, as she was grabbed by the chest and lightly thrown toward Sara.

"Waah!" Sara had been about to attack Rio from behind when Alma came flying toward her, making her dodge her in a fluster.

"I can't believe you dodged that, Sara!" Alma objected.

"We both would've been taken out if I tried to catch you!"

In that time, Rio had braced his sword once again and started to run toward Sara.

"Guh, Alma — quick! Pick up your weapon!" Sara just barely managed to block Rio's attack as she ordered Alma. Alma rolled against the ground to land safely and started running, when Orphia's voice echoed from the sidelines.

"Sara, fall back!"

Sara backstepped reflexively. Soon after, countless crumbled lumps of dirt scattered around the open space and attacked Rio.

She used the dirt wall I used to defend myself earlier. Rio determined that Orphia had been hiding in his blind spot behind the dirt wall when she attacked him, then backstepped to face the incoming clumps of dirt. He flicked away the bothersome dirt lumps with his sword and feet.

While Rio was evading the attack, Orphia prepared an extra large water bullet with spirit arts and fired it. The water bullet arched in a gentle parabola through the air and came down on Rio's head with a great amount of force. But Rio leapt, pouring a large amount of essence into his sword and slicing it in a single splashing stroke. The water that had been split violently went rushing toward the floor.

At the same time, Sara and Alma both attacked Rio from opposite sides once again.

"Our timing was perfect this time," Sara said with a grin. Alma was closing in on the opposite side, forming the perfect

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pincer attack. Just like earlier, dealing with one of them would leave no time to intercept the other. However—

"?!"

The very next moment, a large blast of wind blew out from around Rio.

"Kyah?!" Sara and Alma both let out a scream as they were blown away. Then, Rio approached the fallen Sara and pointed his training sword at her.

"...I yield," Sara groaned with disappointment, admitting her defeat.

"That's enough! The victor is Lord Rio!" Uzuma declared.

"Ugh... so you were gathering ode within you as you were dealing with Orphia's water bullet," Sara said to Rio with a pout.

"I could tell you and Alma were about to attack me right away. I thought it'd be more efficient to take the both of you out at once, since you decided to come at me together." Rio nodded with a wry smile.

"So you're saying we fell right into your trap... Ugh..." Sara sighed.

"Ahaha, looks like we lost," Orphia added as she approached.

Alma also walked over with a small sigh. "Looks like we have a lot to learn. Rio toyed with us again this time."

"It wasn't my intention to toy with you — it was actually a good training experience. Your coordination as a trio was wonderful," Rio said in support of the three of them, smiling softly.

"That's not what I meant..." Alma murmured quietly, recalling how she was treated like a little girl during the match. However, her words didn't reach Rio's ears.

"It was a splendid match. Lord Rio, if you would face me next!" Uzuma stepped forward as Rio's next opponent in high spirits.

"Sure, it'd be my pleasure," Rio agreed readily, then had

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his sparring match with Uzuma. Miharu and Aki watched on in astonishment, while Masato gazed at the mock battle with a fire burning in his eyes.

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After the sparring match, Rio and the others returned home to take a break. Rio took the initiative to serve the food, while Miharu and Orphia immediately volunteered to help, preparing tea and snacks for several people. In that time, Vera and Arslan led a heated conversation about the sparring match they just witnessed.

“The coolest part was when you tore Orphia’s water bullet apart with a slash of your sword!”

“No no no, the highlight of that match was when he released that blast of wind with spirit arts!”

Vera and Arslan went back and forth, discussing which moment was the highlight of the match between Rio and Sara’s group. Apparently, they both had a particular instance in mind they weren’t willing to give up on.

“Hmph! What do you think, Latifa?” Vera asked.

“Huh? All of it, I think. Onii-chan was super cool. Ehehe,” Latifa replied, smiling happily. Prompted by Vera, Latifa smiled happily as she answered.

Arslan sighed. “There’s no point in asking Latifa — she has a brother complex. What about you, Masato?” he asked.

“...Hm? Me? ...I think the most impactful moment was when Rio clashed his weapon with Alma head-on.” Masato seemed to be distracted with his thoughts, but had been listening enough to answer with a quiet tone of excitement in his voice.

“You mean when he spun around and slashed sideways?” Vera specified.

“Yeah, that was amazing. I never imagined he’d face Alma in a test of strength.” Arslan said keenly.

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Alma turned her cool gaze to Arslan. “Why is that unimaginable to you?” She was aware her race had monstrous strength, but it left her maiden heart with mixed feelings.

“Huh? U-Uhh, no, I didn’t mean it that way!” Arslan’s voice cracked as he shook his head. Just then, Rio and the others returned to the living room with trays of tea and snacks.

“Here, food’s ready. Were you talking about the match just now?” Orphia asked with a grin.

“Yeah, we were,” Arslan said, then eagerly changed the subject. “Oh, that’s right… Hey, Rio. Please teach me how to fight later!”

“Yeah, sure,” Rio agreed readily.

“H-Hey, umm. Could you… Could you teach me how to use a sword, too, Haruto?” Masato asked nervously.

“…Teach you swordcraft?” Rio’s eyes widened faintly.

“…Yeah. Can you?” Masato asked, watching Rio’s expression.

“Hmm… I don’t think that’s something I can decide on my own,” Rio answered ambiguously in a guilty tone, looking at Miharu and Aki.

“Ah, umm. I don’t really like dangerous things, but I want to respect Masato’s choices. Aki also agreed that it’s fine as long as it’s not dangerous…” Miharu explained timidly.

“I see. So the two of you have discussed it already,” Rio said with a slightly unsettled expression.

“Yes. Back when Sara was giving us a tour of the house, we were talking about what we wanted to do during our stay in the village,” Miharu said, watching Rio’s face.

“Shouldn’t it be okay, then? He really wants to do it. There’s no man that wouldn’t feel fired up after seeing that fight,” Arslan said casually.

“Quiet, you,” Sara scolded. “Rio has his own thoughts. He’s a guardian of Masato’s, too.”

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“Ah, no, I was just thinking a little. Umm… If you asked me if it was dangerous or not, I’d have to say it’s dangerous. It’s not like sports.” Rio looked at Miharu and Aki with a troubled expression, then turned to Masato with a serious look on his face. “Could I ask why you want to learn swordcraft, Masato? If you want to do it as a sport, I can’t recommend it.”

“I…” Masato was faintly taken aback and was rendered speechless.

“There are children in the village like Arslan and Vera that have been handling weapons from a young age in order to become warriors. Everyone’s learning in preparation for a real battle. Right?” Rio said to Masato, turning to Sara for confirmation.

“…Yes, that’s right. In order to show that the lessons are real and not a game, the instructor usually beats the understanding of a warrior into the children through real combat first. Many of them give up on being warriors at that point.” Sara nodded slowly.

“Aah, yeah, that. That was scary…” Arslan muttered with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Scary…” Vera nodded in agreement.

“Masato, the children of the village are… No, the people of this world pick up their weapons knowing that a battle is a fight for one’s life. That’s what weapons exist for. If you want to pick up a weapon, you have to be prepared for that. It’d be even more dangerous if you were to take up a weapon without knowing that,” Rio said to Masato, carefully choosing his words.

“…” Masato gulped, falling silent with a contemplative expression on his face as he pondered Rio’s words.

“It’d be one thing if you were to spend the rest of your life living safely within the village, but you’re going to return to Strahl someday, right? That place is more dangerous than the village. When you fight for your life, you also risk other

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people's lives. By picking up a weapon, you have to be prepared to treat even children as fighters," Rio said with a conflicted look, telling the unfortunate truth.

The atmosphere in the room was heavy; while Sara and the spirit folk girls could understand what Rio was saying, Miharu and Aki felt like Rio's words were directed at them, making them feel extremely uncomfortable.

"But… that being said, not being a fighter means you'll have to resign yourself to being attacked. Being a non-combatant doesn't always mean one will be treated gently. There may come a time when you'll regret not having the power to fight," Rio said in a somewhat affirmative tone.

"…Huh?" Masato noticed that the nuance of Rio's remarks had changed, making a confused expression appear on his face.

"That's why I'll respect your decision, Masato. It sounded like a lecture, but if you still want to learn swordcraft after everything you just heard, I'll teach you. In other words… I'm of the same opinion as Miharu," Rio said with a strained smile, then looked at Masato in question. *What do you want to do?* his gaze asked.

"I-I… I want to learn swordcraft. I'm scared, but I don't want to regret anything. I want to have the power to protect people!" Masato insisted earnestly.

"…I see — you truly want to learn. Then, I'll teach you in the spirit folk style of learning through a real battle first. It'll be harsh, okay? If you give up here, then we won't go any further," Rio said in a somewhat intimidating tone.

"J… Just what I wanted!" Masato agreed with determination.

"Well, you wouldn't be a man if you backed down here. Do your best." Arslan grinned, thumping Masato on the shoulder.

"Yeah!" Masato nodded with a smile, but a gloomy look fell over Arslan's face.

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“Well, I do believe it’ll be mentally tough as well.”

“I-Is it really that harsh?”

“Ah… Rio is kind, but… hmm. I wonder? Even the normally gentle warriors of the village do a complete one-eighty sometimes. I guess all you can do is fight to the best of your ability against a better opponent?”

“F-Fight? …Me?” Masato tilted his head, his eyes wide.

“Yeah, with Rio. We said it was real combat, didn’t we? In the village, we use that to determine whether or not you have the aptitude to become a warrior,” Arslan explained.

“Oh, so that’s how it is. But, me against Haruto…” Masato recalled the strength Rio showed in the earlier mock battle and gulped nervously.

“That’s how things are here, so why don’t we get to it right away after this? Okay?” Rio asked Masato.

“S-Sure!” Masato nodded, his expression stiff.

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A short time later, Rio stood in the square before the town hall, prepared to spar with Masato. There had been a huge crowd of observers for the earlier match, but after the break, it was only Rio’s group that remained.

Masato was equipped in a full set of the village children’s training gear he borrowed: a one-handed sword and shield, as well as leather armor.

“While there wouldn’t be time to do so in a real match, let’s make sure we warm up properly.”

Obeying Rio’s words, Masato focused on loosening his body carefully. At the same time, Rio was silently checking his movements with a one-handed sword and shield — a combination he rarely used — while he silently practiced stances as he tested his grip. Now that he had agreed to teach Masato, a tense air surrounded Rio; it was as though he was telling people not to approach him recklessly with his

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whole body.

“Onii-chan…” Latifa watched Rio worriedly. No, it wasn’t only Latifa — both Miharu and Aki, as well as Sara, Orphia, and Alma were shrinking back a little at the side of Rio they didn’t usually see. However, they were unable to do anything but watch over Rio and Masato from afar.

“Umm, this is like a practical test in order for Masato to learn swordcraft, right? What exactly is involved in the teaching of understanding through real combat?” Aki asked Sara and the others, seemingly worried for her stepbrother’s well-being.

“It’s a reenactment of a battle for your life. Of course, the gap in ability means it won’t be much of a match, but the instructor acts as though it’s real combat by using a killing intent and real hostility toward their opponent. That way, we can ascertain who has the heart to keep fighting without fearing death,” Sara explained.

“H-He won’t get injured, though… right?”

“He probably will. But Rio wouldn’t hurt him intentionally and we have spirit arts to heal with, so there’s no need to worry about injuries with long-lasting effects.”

Though there was no guarantee for his mental state, Sara added to herself.

“So that’s why everything seems so tense. I’ve never seen Haruto like that before,” Aki said, her gaze fearfully pinned on Rio.

Sara and the rest of the group nodded, their expressions stiff. “…That goes for us, too.”

Then, Rio finished his preparations and approached Miharu and the others. “Miharu, Aki… Sara and the rest of you, too. It might not be very pleasant to watch, so feel free to go home and rest. There’s no need to force yourself to stay, okay?” Rio said somewhat darkly.

“Ah, no… Umm, that’s…” They exchanged glances with each other, awkwardly mumbling under their breath.

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Meanwhile, Miharu slowly raised her hand and expressed her desire to observe. “Umm, please allow me watch you.”

“It may be a little extreme. Are you going to be all right?” Rio asked while watching Miharu’s face.

“I’ll be fine. Umm, since I’ll be entrusting Masato to you with this, I wanted to bear my share of the responsibility. I feel like I have a duty to see things through, too… so please allow me to observe.” Miharu spoke quietly, showing a glimpse of her firm resolve as she bowed her head at Rio.

Rio’s eyes widened faintly as he nodded, showing some surprise. “…I understand.”

“U-Umm! Then please let me watch, too! Because Masato is my little brother!” Aki asked, following suit with Miharu.

“I see… All right.” Rio nodded in agreement.

“Naturally, I’ll be watching too, Onii-chan.” Latifa declared resolutely.

“Yeah, I know,” Rio acknowledged with a faint smile. Sara, Orphia, and Alma all looked at each other and nodded.

“Please let us watch, too,” they requested.

“I’m watching. Masato’s my friend, after all.”

“Me too!” Arslan and Vera chimed in.

“So, in the end, everyone wants to watch. All right.” Rio gave up with a bitter smile and turned on his heel. If it was going to be like this, then he couldn’t afford to hesitate anymore; he had to be prepared to reveal his cold-hearted side. With that, Rio took a small breath and walked toward Masato.

“Shall we begin soon, Masato?”

“Y-Yeah!” Masato nodded nervously.

“You should relax your muscles. Your movements will be too stiff otherwise.”

“O-Okay! Got it… All right!” Masato nodded, taking a deep breath. He braced his one-handed sword and shield as well as he could; he hadn’t been taught any techniques yet, so his form was a little awkward and misshapen.

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Rio readied his sword and shield, too. His left foot was in front, while his right foot was behind; this left the shield on his left side inevitably in the front. It was the standard sparring stance for a sword and shield combination taught in the Kingdom of Beltrum — he had learned during his school days.

"The sword and shield combination is the most common sword style in the Strahl region. In terms of combat against humans, it has excellent balance between offense and defense. That's why I was thinking of teaching you this sword style too, Masato… But you can just consider any technical instruction today as a bonus," Rio explained, standing roughly ten meters away from the other boy. "The rest… I'll teach you as we fight for real. The match starts now — feel free to attack me whenever."

He looked up at the sky. With a small inhale of breath, Rio quietly adjusted his concentration.

"…Huh?" *Was that the signal to begin the fight?* Masato wondered in confusion. However, even if he wasn't aware of it, the battle had already long begun.

"What's wrong? You're not going to come at me?" Rio asked in a cold voice that was tinged with clear hostility and murderous intent.

"?!" That was enough to make Masato feel a dense aura of death; a shudder running through his body. It wasn't only Masato — the others who were watching from the side were involuntarily shaking, too.

What… was that just now? Miharu didn't even understand why she was shaking, but the aura just now was of a type she had never glimpsed before. She couldn't even believe it was being released by the person in front of her… Perhaps that was why her pounding heart wouldn't stop.

However, the amount of discomfort Miharu felt was nothing compared to Masato, who was the one actually on the receiving end of that hostility and malice. His chest

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ached as though his heart was being squeezed.

Come at me quickly, Rio's gaze was demanding the entire time, but Masato's feet wouldn't budge.

"I'll wait another thirty seconds. If you can't attack me in that time, you fail," Rio declared plainly.

"Huh?!" Masato twitched faintly in an attempt to move his sword-wielding hand. He somehow managed to raise both elbows, assuming a fighting stance full of opportunities for Rio to land an attack. Several seconds passed, when suddenly, Masato charged at Rio with a roar.

"...Uuhh, uwaaaah!"

But the sword was heavy. The shield was heavy. His *body* was heavy. Masato couldn't move as he wished, and he didn't know how to move properly. He stopped just before Rio.

Was a sword really something that could be swung at a person? Though it was a training sword without a sharp edge, swinging it with all one's might was still enough to bludgeon someone to death. When he realized such a dangerous weapon was in his grasp, Masato faltered.

"It's all right. No matter how you swing that sword, you won't hit me. There's no need to hold back. Come — hit me. Or... have you had enough? We can quit if you want," Rio said provokingly to Masato.

"Uh... R-Raargh!" There was still some fighting spirit left in Masato, as he managed to shake his sword with impatience.

"Guh?!" Rio purposefully stepped toward the incoming attack and deflected Masato's sword with his shield. The impact blew Masato's sword away.

"Don't move!" Rio yelled.

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Masato froze on the spot; he belatedly realized there was a sword tip pointed at his throat and gulped nervously. If they had been using real swords, the tip would have been a few millimeters from piercing his skin.

“Your swings are inadequate. Letting go of your sword is out of the question. Pick it up and attack again. Once more, from the start,” Rio stated, pulling his sword away as he widened his distance from Masato.

“Huh? Ah…” Masato remained standing in a daze.

“What’s wrong? Pick it up already. The battle resumes now.”

“Uh…” At Rio’s hostile tone, Masato timidly picked up the sword, but the fear of having the sword tip pointed at his throat still remained, making it hard for him to move.

“…Masato. If this were a real battle, I would have moved long ago.”

“R-Right…” Masato cowered with a nod, his usual good-humored manner of speech nowhere to be seen. Despite that, he still seemed to have some fighting spirit left in him, as he picked up the sword, trembling.

“You’re drawing back too much. Your grip is still off, too.” Rio walked up to him, then swung his sword harshly to send Masato’s sword flying. It spun through the air before stabbing into the ground.

“Again. One more time. Pick it up,” Rio ordered mercilessly.

“Ah… Uh…” Masato groaned in a voice that nearly vanished.

“Hurry,” Rio said, making Masato flinch in surprise and pick his sword up. With another careless swing, he knocked Masato’s sword away once again.

“Again. Pick it up,” Rio ordered flatly.

Every time Masato picked up his sword, Rio would send it flying, sometimes pointing his sword tip at his throat. He continuously tormented Masato with his demand to fight

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again and again.

As the onlookers, Miharu and the others watched on with pained expressions. Aki especially, whose body gradually trembled harder as her expression twisted with the desire to speak up. However, even as that was happening, a change was certainly occurring within Masato. Despite being knocked down again and again, Masato's fighting spirit was stimulated and he slowly began to get worked up.

"Uraaargh!" He gradually started to yell as he swung his sword, but even then, he was scared — or maybe frustrated — as his face poured with snot and tears while he attacked Rio. His movements seemed to be getting slightly better from watching and copying Rio's actions, at least.

"That's right. Your shield can also be used as a blunt weapon, but don't swing it recklessly. You'll create a blind spot for yourself." Rio drove his sword sharply into the blind spot Masato created by swinging his shield wildly.

The tip of his sword pointed at Masato's throat. "Again," Rio ordered in a short tone, and regrouped.

"Uugh," Masato groaned in frustration.

"U-Umm, Haruto!" Aki yelled in a loud voice.

"...What?" Rio turned his gaze toward Aki, his tone devoid of all emotion.

Aki faltered for a moment, then stared directly back at Rio and answered. "Uh... Ah, no... Umm, isn't that enough? I think Masato's understood enough about the frame of mind needed for real combat at this point." It showed how much she treasured Masato despite all their usual bickering and insults.

Rio shook his head bluntly. "No, not yet. We're only just finished warming up."

Aki refused to back down. "B-But Masato's at his limit! You're just bullying him like this!" she said, pointing at Masato. His breathing was harsh and his complexion was pale, and both his legs trembled fiercely. Rio sighed quietly.

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“Masato, do you want to give up?” he asked. A silence suddenly fell over everyone present as their attention gathered on Masato.

“I’ll…” Masato murmured, then raised his voice. “I’ll do this!” he yelled with intensity, fixing his gaze on Rio.

“Masato, you…” A sour expression crossed Aki’s face. She wanted to say more, but Masato’s glare made her close her mouth.

“I see. As long as Masato desires it, I won’t ease up.” Rio shook his head slowly, his expression emotionless.

“…I apologize for interrupting. Please take care of Masato.” Aki’s face was woeful as she bowed her head at Rio and spoke in a shaking voice. Her eyes were filled with frustrated tears.

“…Got it. Let’s resume this, Masato.” Rio nodded, immediately returning to the battle.

Ten minutes later, Masato was lying face up on the floor, mentally and physically drained to the core. “Hah… Hah…” He attempted to pick up his sword once more, but his body refused to budge.

“…That’s enough, Masato. It’s over. You did well,” Rio informed Masato gently, letting the strength drain from his own body.

Masato scraped together the energy to speak. “Is it… hah… hah… over? I can… still… go on.”

“It’s all right. I know how strong your heart is now, so I’ll be teaching you swordcraft properly from tomorrow onward,” Rio declared.

“R-Really? I-I did it.” Masato must have been relieved, as his whole body relaxed and he slumped his full weight against the ground.

“…I’m sorry. I may have been a little harsh,” Rio said with an apologetic look.

“Haha… I thought so too. But it was for my sake, right? Thanks to that, I know just how naive I was. Thanks,

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Haruto.”

“…You’ll become a good swordsman, Masato.”

“That’s because you’ll be my teacher, Haruto.” Masato nodded, giggling.

“Really, now…” Rio huffed with a smile.

“Looks like that’s settled, then. You were wonderful, Masato,” Sara said.

“Yup. You were really cool,” Orphia added.

“That wasn’t a test that just anyone could pass. You should feel proud of yourself,” Alma said, adding to the praise.

“Masato, good work.”

“…Well done, Masato.” Miharu and Aki also called out to him.

“You did it, Masato. Rio’s training was no walk in the park, huh?”

“Right? He was way harsher than the instructor I had!”

“You stood before Onii-chan face to face. I think you should be proud.”

Arslan, Vera, and Latifa gave Masato words of encouragement and praise, too.

“Hehe, everyone… Thank you. —Ow, that hurts, Aki.” Masato looked up at them and thanked them; his face was as bright as the clear and sunny sky. But when Aki struck him on the head, he pouted his lips.

“It’s your fault for worrying me with your recklessness.”

“Heh, so you were worried for me?”

“Shuddup.” Aki prodded Masato in the head once more.

Rio watched the siblings’ exchange. “Let’s make Masato’s favorite foods tonight, to celebrate,” he suggested.

“Ah, that’s a good idea,” Orphia agreed. “Let’s have a party! Miharu, we can cook together.”

“Sure, I’d love to.”

“Eeh, that’s not fair! I want to join in too. Make us meat patties!”

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“Me too! I want to eat spaghetti!”

Arslan and Vera voiced their desire to join in.

“Hey, it’s not your favorite foods they’ll be cooking, you know?” Sara stated with a sigh.

“Ehehe, then I want to go to the hot springs with everyone after dinner,” Latifa suggested with a happy laugh.

“That sounds good. The sparring matches earlier did make us sweat a bit,” Alma nodded, interested.

Haruto, you worked hard today. Aishia’s voice echoed in the back of Rio’s mind.

...*Aishia?* Rio looked around his surroundings in surprise, but he didn’t see Aishia anywhere; he figured that was because she was in her spirit form, but...

Dryas taught me how to communicate with my contract partner through long distance telepathy. I’m to your left right now, but I can communicate within a one kilometer radius. Focus on the path that connects us and look my way.

Rio moved his eyes as ordered, then spotted Aishia at the corner of the square.

...*So that’s what you mean. Is this okay?* Rio immediately replied to Aishia through telepathy.

It’s good.

Have you finished talking with Dryas already?

Yup. We finished talking for today, so I came to find you.

I see. Will you tell me what you talked about later?

Of course. We’ll talk then.

While the people around him made merry, Aishia’s gentle voice echoed in the back of Rio’s head. That was enough to fill his chest with a strange warmth, healing him.

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That night, Rio and the others prepared an extravagant meal and held a dinner party to celebrate Masato’s ability to

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overcome the practical test. However, Masato was so exhausted, he fell asleep right away.

Afterward, Rio offered to watch the house as Masato snoozed away in his room, while the girls — excluding Aishia — headed for the hot springs near the town hall that they had reserved. With Rio and Masato remaining in the house, Arslan went home by himself. Aishia passed on the hot springs as she wanted to sleep, since spirits could remain clean even without bathing anyway.

After seeing the girls off at the door, Rio returned to the living room alone. Everyone had cleaned up after their meal together, so he didn't have anything in particular to do.

Aishia seems to have fallen asleep... I guess I'll take a bath, too. Better go get a change of clothes.

Rio stretched lightly to relieve his stiff body before heading to his room. He turned on the artifact-powered light in his room and entered.

"Haruto," Aishia said, suddenly materializing beside Rio.

Rio's eyes widened slightly. "...You're still awake."

"Yeah. I have something to tell you." Aishia nodded.

"Oh, right... About the required knowledge of a spirit that Dryas told you about?"

"That, and about you, too."

"...Me?" Rio responded in surprise.

Aishia nodded, peering at Rio's face closely. "Yeah, because you're feeling a little sad. Are you okay?"

"That's not true... Why do you ask?" Rio swallowed his breath, watching Aishia back.

"Because you showed everyone a side of yourself that you didn't want them to see," Aishia stated without any hesitance at all, as though it was obvious.

"...Why do you think that?" Rio asked nervously.

"I told you in the beginning: I know everything about Haruto," Aishia asserted in response. By the "beginning," she probably meant the first time she woke up in the rock

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house. Rio's eyes widened with shock.

"I see… So I guess there's nothing I can hide from you, Aishia…" he said, disappointed. He let a bitter smile show through his facade.

"Yeah."

"Ahaha, of course you'd say that. I just want to ask one thing. Was I acting weird after the mock battle?"

Aishia shook her head. "You looked normal from the outside… But deep in your heart, you weren't."

"It's all right. It's fine, Aishia." Rio said as though he was convincing himself, shaking his head slowly, but Aishia suddenly walked forward.

"You don't have to act strong in front of me," she said, hugging Rio gently.

"?!" Rio froze stiff with a flinch.

"Even if it's fine, I want to hear it. What Haruto is feeling, what Haruto is thinking," Aishia whispered by Rio's ear.

The strength in Rio's body gave out as he sighed. Aishia's warmth was so comforting — his heart felt completely at ease.

"…I do feel like I showed them something I didn't want them to see. The truth is, I didn't want to show them that. But if they want to live in this world, then I believe there are things they need to see. *The violent and cruel side of humans,*" Rio added after a moment with a mumble at the end.

"Was the reason why you didn't want to show them because it was Miharu, Aki, and Masato?" Aishia asked, seeing through him.

"…That's right. I wonder what they think of how I acted today… It's possible that I scared them. When I imagine that, my chest kind of hurts." Rio nodded, voicing a feeble whine he would have never revealed to anyone else. "But… it's fine," he said with a smile of resignation, as though he had sensed something.

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It was true that Miharu and the others had yet to scrape the surface of this world's values, but Rio believed it was better that way. Ignorantly believing in peace would expose them to danger, so a certain amount of exposure was necessary... but there was no need to submerge them in it. That was why they only needed to know enough to understand that they couldn't always wander through the world with only idealistic thoughts in their minds.

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Rio didn't want to force that role on anyone else. That was why he thought teaching Masato swordcraft was the perfect opportunity; humans revealed the ugliest side of themselves when they were fighting, so if anything, it was a little better to cause them to feel fear. Not to mention —

The worlds we live in are different.

That was right — they lived in different worlds. He could no longer turn back, and the visitors to this world still had the possibility of being able to return to Earth. That's why Rio believed this was for the best.

"I will always be with you, Haruto. I'll accept all of you," Aishia said, hugging Rio even tighter.

"...Thank you." Rio hugged Aishia back softly and awkwardly.

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Thirty minutes later, Miharu was thinking about Rio as she sank into the water of the hot spring.

I'll have to thank Haruto again sometime.

Of course, she was thinking about the situation with Masato. He respected Masato's own will, faced him seriously in battle, and agreed to teach him how to use a sword. When Masato first said he wanted to learn swordcraft, Miharu had imagined a vague extension of some kind of sport instead. She hadn't properly understood that swords and swordcraft were weapons and techniques that were required in a fight for your life. Perhaps, if it was Haruto — the Haruto that had memories of life in Japan — then Miharu believed that he would have been able to teach swordcraft from the perspective of a sport.

But Haruto didn't — Rio didn't — do that.

He clearly explained why swords and swordcraft existed, then challenged what Masato wanted to do. He must have thought that it would have been unfortunate for Masato to

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live in this world thinking of swordcraft as a type of sport. Miharu could keenly feel the amount of thought that Rio had put into Masato, as well as the rest of them.

Even though I should be pulling myself together, I'm still relying on Haruto for everything.

Miharu's face fell with shame. Rather than pulling herself together, she had been unreliable, and constantly needing Rio's support. She hadn't done anything for Aki and Masato, as their elder. The fact that she felt pathetic was inevitable.

I can't do anything about swordcraft myself, but... Yes — the least I can do is make sure I support Haruto properly.

Miharu nodded firmly, having made her decision.

For now, I have to find something I can do... Rio was the kind of person who could do anything flawlessly, so it was difficult to find something she could do for him. Miharu groaned quietly.

"What's wrong, Miharu?" Latifa, who had already been soaking in the bathtub, asked her with a tilt of her head.

Surprised, Miharu shook her head. "Huh? Ah, umm. It's nothing."

"...Were you thinking about Onii-chan, maybe?" Latifa asked, as though she had seen right through Miharu's thoughts.

"U-Umm... Yeah. How did you know?" Miharu's eyes widened.

"Ehehe, because I was thinking of him too," Latifa said, nodding confidently.

"You're always thinking about Rio, Latifa," Sara said in an exasperated tone, as she'd been listening to them.

"Heh. Don't you also think about Rio at a fairly frequent rate, Sara?" Alma quipped, jumping into the conversation without a moment's delay.

"I-I may have been doing so just now, but it doesn't happen frequently." Sara shook her head in embarrassment.

"Fufu, were you thinking of the Rio we saw earlier today?

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I was too," Orphia said with a smile; she was submerged in the tub. Then Sara looked at Miharu, Latifa, Orphia, and Alma, the four girls who were in the bathtub with her.

"I guess we were all thinking the same thing," she said with a small sigh.

"Hmph! I was thinking about Rio too, you know?" Vera pouted her lips as she spoke up. Aki nodded hesitantly beside her.

"Well, me too... I mean, about that mock battle between Masato and Haruto."

"Then, what did you two think after seeing that battle today?" Sara asked Vera and Aki, watching their expressions.

"I... umm. Honestly, I was scared. I almost thought Masato was going to get killed," Aki said with a pained expression.

"I had chills running down my spine. His intensity was amazing, even though I was just an onlooker," Vera agreed, shuddering.

"It's a rite of passage. It's all in order to understand that sometimes, you need to be relentless before your opponent's death. It might be drastic, but it's a necessary experience in order to become a warrior. You have to learn this, so it's better to do it earlier and in the safest situation possible," Sara said with a strained smile.

"So if a war begins, every warrior in this village will turn to what Haruto was like today?" Aki asked timidly.

"...No, not everyone can show the same amount of vigor that Rio can — only the warriors who have crossed the line of life and death before."

"Ahaha. I felt overwhelmed by it, even though I was just watching from the sidelines."

"Right. It gives me chills to imagine what would have happened if Rio had fought us in that state when he first wandered into this village with Latifa."

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Sara, Orphia, and Alma — the three girls who sometimes had to become warriors — each voiced their thoughts.

"...Does that mean Haruto has overcome that much carnage on the battlefield?" Aki asked, swallowing.

"In a place we don't know, probably." Sara nodded with a serious expression.

When we first arrived in this world, the slave trader who kidnapped us seemed to be really afraid of Rio too. Did he see it too? The Rio from today... Aki suddenly imagined, an indescribable chill running down her spine. She felt too irrationally scared to think any more than that.

Unconvinced, Vera turned to question Latifa. "Hmm, while it wasn't a Rio that *we* were familiar with... Did you recognize that side of him, Latifa?"

Latifa shook her head, a fleeting smile on her face. "Nope, I didn't either. But to me, Onii-chan is Onii-chan. Nothing has changed. What about you, Miharu?" she asked. Miharu had been silently lost in her own thoughts. Miharu seemed to search inside herself for her feelings before agreeing with Latifa.

"Hm? Yeah, I agree with Latifa. Even if there's a side of him I don't know, Haruto is still Haruto. I don't think that will change."

The Rio that had faced Masato was certainly colder and scarier than she ever imagined he could be from his usual self. However, even then, there was something sad and lonely about him. Strangely, that didn't make him feel like a different person to Miharu. Perhaps it would be better to say that the Rio Miharu knew hadn't changed at his core.

That being said, when she thought about that Rio, something strange within her chest stirred, as though he was somewhere far away, despite being right nearby. With that as her only concern, Miharu gave a pained smile.

"Ehehe, I see. Then you're just like me." Latifa nodded happily.

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“…Yeah, just like you.” This time, Miharu was able to smile happily, and the painful stirring in her chest quieted down a little.

“I see. That’s true — Rio is still Rio. I think I understand now!” Vera also seemed to comprehend something, beaming widely.

“Hmph, it feels like you took the spotlight off that moment.” Sara pouted a little in protest.

“Fufu. Then that means you’re thinking the same thing. I am too,” Orphia said, smiling gently with amusement.

Caught off guard, Sara blushed deeply. “Ugh…”

“Ah, Sara’s embarrassed.” Alma grinned.

“Hmph!” Sara turned away to hide her embarrassment, the others all watching her before breaking into giggles. Sara groaned and ducked her head, cheeks turning all the more scarlet.

“Fufufu, this is fun. If only Aishia came along too,” Latifa said, a happy smile on her face.

“She’s probably turned into her spirit form and snoozing away inside Haruto right now, though she’ll sometimes turn into her physical form in her sleep and end up burying into Rio’s bed,” Aki remembered, her lips tugging upward in a grin as she spoke.

“Eeh, really?! That’s not fair. I want to sleep in the same bed with him!” Latifa exclaimed with jealousy.

“Eeh? B-But isn’t Haruto like a brother to you, Latifa? Umm, that is… wouldn’t it be embarrassing? Sleeping together with your brother…” Aki seemed to be imagining herself in Latifa’s place, her speech awkward.

“Huh? That’s not true. I want to bathe together with him, too,” Latifa replied passionately.

“B-Bathe?! Nope nope nope! Never! No matter what, that’s impossible!” Aki shook her head with a bright red face. Seeing her reaction, Latifa peered closely at her expression.

“Hmm. Do you have a brother too, Aki?”

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“Huh? Yeah, I do. His name’s Takahisa.”

“Huh, really…” Latifa hummed and stared off into the distance.

“Speaking of Lady Aishia, there’s one thing I’m curious about…” Sara began hesitantly.

“What’s wrong?” Aki asked.

“U-Umm, don’t you think Aishia sticks too closely to Rio?” Sara said, watching the expressions around her.

Orphia’s elf ears twitched in interest. “Ah, that thought crossed my mind too.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Though I’m used to it by now…” Aki agreed with a wry smile.

“Has she been like that ever since you were in the Strahl region?” Alma asked, also intrigued.

They all mutually agreed on this fact because Aishia was always beside Rio. For example, they would stand next to each other as though snuggling up, and their hands and bodies would constantly make contact. It wasn’t as though Rio was pampering her, but it came across as something more natural — and it ended up catching the eyes of everyone around them.

“Hmm. But doesn’t Latifa also cling to Haruto a lot?” Miharu said with a tilt of her head, but Sara immediately shook her head.

“No, it’s something different from a sibling relationship…”

“Right. It’s hard to put it into words, but there’s something peculiar in the air between them,” Alma said, nodding.

“Rio’s a gentleman, so he usually maintains an appropriate amount of distance from her,” Orphia added.

“Yes, that’s it!” Sara jumped with fierce agreement. “Even though he’s like that, Lady Aishia gets special treatment, almost like it’s only natural for her to be attached to him so much.”

The girls continued to chat and gossip excitedly until they

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were done soaking their bodies.

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The next morning, after Rio finished eating breakfast, he shut himself in his room to be alone, stating that he had work to finish. Furthermore, Sara, Orphia, and Alma had business to take care of in the town hall, so they went out, while Latifa, Aki, and Masato had made promises to meet with Vera and Arslan outside to play together.

As a result, Miharu and Aishia were the only ones left in the living room.

“So the three of us are watching the house. It feels kind of refreshing… And it’s been a while since I’ve been alone with Ai-chan.” Miharu sat on the sofa and faced Aishia, grinning happily as she spoke.

“Should we call Haruto here to join us?”

“Fufu, we can’t. I’m sure that’d be fun, but Haruto has things to do in his room.”

“Okay… Then it’s just the two of us. What’ll we talk about?” Aishia nodded, then cocked her head to the side.

“Hmm. Oh, I know. Can I ask you a question? Since it’s just the two of us, I wanted to ask you something about Haruto…” Miharu said, remembering something she wanted to bring up.

“What is it?”

“Haruto agreed to officially teach Masato swordcraft, right? That was why I wanted to thank him for that, as well as for taking care of us on a daily basis. So I was wondering if there was anything I could do for him.”

A faint contemplative look fell over Aishia’s face before she shook her head slowly. “…I don’t think Haruto wants you to thank him for that, though.”

“Yeah… I know that, but I want to do something. It may simply be for my own satisfaction, but if Haruto could be

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happy…” Miharu placed a hand against her chest as she voiced her inner thoughts.

“I think Haruto would be really happy if you told him those feelings,” Aishia suggested, catching Miharu off guard and making her flustered.

“Huh? T-That’s too embarrassing, saying it so directly… I’d rather do it in a way that involved some kind of gift or action, so that’s why I’m discussing it with you, Ai-chan.”

“…If it’s something from you, then Haruto will be happy no matter what.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Haruto can do anything by himself, so I can’t think of what I should do for him. All I ever do is hold him back…” Miharu said, her face falling with sadness.

“You’re wrong.” Aishia shook her head bluntly.

“Eh?”

“It’s true that Haruto can do many things by himself, but being by yourself is lonely. Having support is essential. Haruto would definitely be happy to have your support. That’s why, Miharu, you should support Haruto,” Aishia said eloquently in response to Miharu’s expression of wonder.

Miharu blinked in surprise for a few moments, before a gentle smile spread across her face. “…Yeah. Okay,” she nodded quietly.

“Good.” Aishia also gave a soft smile.

“Fufu, I’m glad I talked to you after all, Ai-chan. You really know Haruto well.”

“You should know him well, too, Miharu.”

“Huh? I don’t think so…” Miharu tilted her head curiously at Aishia’s words. “Do you know what would make Haruto happy?”

“…Hearing Miharu’s feelings.”

“Ugh, I told you that was too embarrassing. If it was just thanking him for everything he does every day, and that I wanted to repay him, then I guess…”

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“…Then, will you hug Haruto?” Aishia suggested, cocking her head.

“T-That’s even more embarrassing! No way!” Miharu yelled in a fluster.

“Then you should make him a delicious meal for lunch of all his favorite foods.”

“Lunch… Lunch, huh? I’m always making that… But what are Haruto’s favorites?” Miharu asked.

“…Omelet rice. Back when Haruto was still on Earth, he loved that food as a child,” Aishia answered simply.

Miharu had a somewhat distant look in her eyes for a moment before coming to an enthusiastic decision. “Omelet rice, I see… Okay, I’ll try making it!”

“I want to help, too. Teach me how to make it the Miharu way,” Aishia requested. Since she had helped out with the cooking quite often when they had lived in the rock house together, Aishia was now able to make a few things, too, though not as well as the other two girls. She was still in training, one could say.

“Yup, of course. Let’s make a few other things together, too!” Miharu agreed cheerfully.

Thus, Miharu and Aishia started cooking together. They decided on making a stew, a salad, and cake for dessert, before quickly making their way to the kitchen.

The two girls put on their matching aprons and chose to bake the cake first. After the preliminary preparations were done, they poured the ingredients for a sponge cake batter into a wooden bowl. Aishia followed Miharu’s instructions and mixed the ingredients thoroughly. Once the flour was mixed well and the batter had a springy texture to it, Miharu added the butter she had warmed beforehand into the bowl with milk, then directed Aishia to stir it together. “Yup, I think that’s enough. We’ll add some warm butter and milk into it… Okay, now try mixing it lightly. Your aim is to give the batter a sheen.”

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“Okay.” Aishia obediently mixed the contents of the bowl as ordered.

“…Yup, that looks like enough. Next, we’ll pour it into this mold. Make sure no air gets into the batter. Don’t do it too low, and go slowly…” Miharu gently guided Aishia’s hands that were holding onto the bowl.

“Like this?” Once Aishia poured the batter into the mold, Miharu placed the now-filled mold into the oven with practiced hands.

“Yes, just like that. Once we bake it for 40 minutes, the sponge will be complete. …And there we go. In the meantime, let’s make the stew.”

Thus, the two of them cooked together while chatting happily with each other. After a fair amount of time had passed, Miharu took a chance to suddenly ask Aishia a question.

“…Hey, Ai-chan.”

“What?”

“You’ve forgotten everything from before you first woke up, but you still remembered your contract partner. You knew about Haruto, right?”

“Yeah.” Aishia gave a short nod.

“Umm, then… What kind of person is the Haruto that you knew, Ai-chan? Exactly the same person as the one you know now?” Miharu asked hesitantly, gauging Aishia for her reaction.

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After a beat, Aishia responded quietly. “...Haruto is Haruto. Cowardly, with no confidence, trapped by his own past, and at a loss for what to do. Despite that, he’s a strong person that tries to do the right thing and move forward.”

When Miharu heard the abstract description of Rio’s persona, she smiled rather sadly. “You know so much about Haruto that I don’t know...”

“Maybe. But the Haruto that Miharu knows well exists, too.”

“R-Really?” Miharu tilted her head with uncertainty.

“Yeah. You just haven’t realized it,” Aishia declared confidently.

Miharu’s eyes widened in surprise before she smiled with amusement. “Fufu, you speak with such confidence, Ai-chan.”

“...That’s because I want Miharu to accept Haruto,” Aishia said, fixing her gaze on Miharu.

“I see... Okay.” Miharu ducked her head shyly before giving a small nod, then swiftly went back to cooking to hide her embarrassment.

“Are we done talking, then?” Aishia asked.

“Y-Yeah. Sorry for asking something so weird.” Miharu nodded with a smile.

After that, their time cooking together went well. Then, just as they had nearly finished the dishes, Rio appeared in the living room, immediately noticing the delicious scent wafting from the kitchen.

“Sorry, Miharu. Is this the lunch you prepared for me? Oh, and Aishia too,” he said as he walked into the kitchen. When he spotted Miharu and Aishia sporting the same aprons together, his eyes widened faintly.

“Yes, we were just thinking about coming to call you, Haruto,” Miharu replied with a smile.

“It’s filled with appreciation and affection for Haruto,” Aishia said monotonously. It was hard to tell whether Aishia

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was joking or saying that because she seriously believed it.

"Ahaha, we tried our best." Miharu grinned shyly without denying Aishia's words.

"...Umm, thank you very much. Both of you. Is that the smell of stew, by the way?" Rio thanked them with a little embarrassment, before changing the subject to the food prepared.

"Ah, yes. We're just about to start the omelet rice."

Rio's expression brightened happily at the mention of omurice. "That sounds good. I was just in the mood for that."

"Miharu's special omelet rice... It's delicious," Aishia said, giving her stamp of approval.

"I-I don't think it warrants that much praise..." Miharu muttered somewhat uncertainly.

"No, I really want to try Miharu's omelet rice, too," Rio requested somewhat restlessly.

"Fufu, thank you. Please have a seat and wait there, Haruto."

He really does seem to love omelet rice, just like Aishia said, Miharu thought with a giggle as she set about cooking.

In a matter of minutes, the cooking was completed and the freshly made omelet rice was brought out to the table where Rio was waiting, along with the other dishes Miharu and Aishia had made.

"Here you go."

"Thank you very much. Umm... What about you two?" Rio looked up curiously at how they were still standing around after setting the table.

"Ah, umm. I was hoping to hear your opinion first," Miharu said shyly.

"I see... Then I'll dig in while it's still hot. If you don't mind me..." Sensing the situation at hand, Rio took a bite of the omelet rice covered in stew rather shyly. As he chewed, the flavor of the soft-boiled egg mixed with the stew rushed

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into his mouth. The rice, mixed with the stew, tasted harmonious together.

“It’s delicious! This is amazing!” Rio said, eyes widening like saucers.

Miharu sighed with relief. “Really?! I’m glad. Omelet rice is actually the first dish my mother taught me how to cook. After making it so many times, it’s secretly become my specialty dish,” she said happily.

“I see, so that’s how it is. But why is it a secret?”

“Ahaha, I just haven’t had any opportunity to make it for anyone outside of my family.”

“Is that so?” Satisfied, Rio smiled with amusement.

“Umm, Haruto… Thank you for everything you’ve done,” Miharu said as she peered at his face.

Rio tilted his head curiously before returning the sentiment. “…Sure? Same here.”

Aishia watched over the two of them in silence.

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Meanwhile, Latifa, Aki, and Masato had left the house to meet up with Vera and Arslan. They were currently sitting in a corner of the village square having a picnic as they chatted together.

Laid out before them were the lunch boxes that Miharu and Orphia had made, as well as the food that Vera’s mother had prepared.

“Hey Masato, will Rio be teaching you swordcraft today?” Arslan asked as he stuffed his cheeks with sandwiches.

Masato nodded. “Yeah. He said he’d teach me here in the square in the afternoon.”

“Hmm. If you guys finish early, I’ll ask him to spar with me, too,” Arslan said with a grin.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve faced Onii-chan in a match. I think I’ll ask him too,” Latifa said, giggling happily.

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“Today, I’ll be asking Sara to face me for the first time in a few days.” Vera seemed to have her mind set on sparring with her sister.

Aki watched Latifa and Vera closely. *Even though the two of them look just like normal girls my age, they’re already taking lessons to become warriors. Aren’t they scared?* she wondered to herself.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Aki?” Vera asked, noticing her expression.

“Ah, umm… I was just thinking about how everyone’s training like warriors already, even though you’re my age. You all went through the same initiation as Masato and still wanted to fight, right?” Aki voiced the thoughts that had been floating around in her head.

Latifa hummed in thought before answering Aki’s question. “…Hmm. I don’t think it’s right to say we *wanted* to fight. And if you asked me whether fighting was scary or not, then I’d say it’s scary to fight.”

“…Even though it’s scary, you fight?” Aki asked timidly.

“Yup. Because it’s more scary not having the power to fight back when you need to. Masato said it as well, but I want power to protect my loved ones. It hurts just to stand by and watch,” Latifa said resolutely, smiling at the end of her explanation. Aki watched Latifa’s expression carefully.

“That’s right. I think the same way as Latifa,” Vera offered.

“Me too. Well, there are warriors in the village obsessed with battles. Like Uzuma, who enjoys fighting against strong opponents,” Arslan chimed in.

“The power to protect…” Aki mumbled, looking at Masato.

“W-What?” Masato asked with a high-pitched voice.

“No, it’s nothing…” Aki shook her head softly.

“Fufu, so Masato wants to protect Aki.” Vera guessed at Masato’s intentions with a grin.

“Wha… N-… Y-You’re wrong!” Masato disagreed with a

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flushed face.

“You say that, but your blush is undeniable proof!” Vera said confidently, to which Masato desperately refuted.

“I’m telling you, you’re wrong! You’re totally wrong!”

“Well, Masato’s feelings aside, there are times where you won’t be able to have your way without power. When it comes down to it, the only one who can protect you is you,” Arslan said, bringing their conversation to an end with a huff of laughter.

“You’re just retelling what you heard from the warriors, Arslan.” Vera stared at Arslan disapprovingly.

“Guh. I-It’s no big deal, is it? I have my own thoughts about those words,” Arslan said, turning away in embarrassment.

Vera cocked her head, not quite satisfied yet. “I get what you’re saying, but hearing it from an amateur like you only has half as much impact.”

“Ahaha. Then, Aki, let’s say someone precious to you tried to protect you. How would you feel if they put themselves in a dangerous position before you?” Latifa asked with a faint smile.

“Umm, no, I don’t want that.” Aki was able to imagine it immediately; the first thing that had come to her mind was the sight of Miharu jumping in between her and the mysterious humanoid monsters that tried to attack them in the Strahl region. The next thing that came to mind were her brothers, Takahisa and Masato.

“Right? That’s why we want the power to protect others. At the very least, I don’t want to be a hindrance to Onii-chan,” Latifa said, smiling a little sadly.

“I also want the strength to protect and support my sister. That’s why I fight even if I’m scared,” Vera nodded next.

“...I feel like the fog has cleared a little... I understand how everyone feels now. If it was for Miharu and my brother, I’d fight even if I was scared, too,” she said with a gentle smile.

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Now she could understand why Masato had wanted to learn swordcraft yesterday; she even felt the same way.

"Oi, Aki. You mentioned Miharu and Takahisa, but what about me?" Masato asked, pointing at himself in a showy manner.

"YOU'RE going to protect ME, aren't you?" Aki giggled happily.

"Yeah, yeah. Fine, whatever," Masato replied listlessly, hiding his embarrassment.

"Oh, Masato's feeling shy," Arslan commented in amusement, with Vera joining in.

"Aki's also getting embarrassed at how honestly Masato admitted it."

The two siblings both blushed red and fell silent. Seeing their sibling exchange made Latifa giggle, but she felt a small feeling of doubt that was caught on something.

Aki must have meant that Takahisa person she was separated from when she said "my brother." I wonder... Has she forgotten about Onii-chan?

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Miharu and company continued to enjoy their peaceful days in the village. Just like that, over a month and a half had passed in the blink of an eye.

One day, Rio decided to address everyone who had gathered at the dining table for dinner.

"I think it's about time I headed for the Strahl region. It seems like Miharu, Aki, and Masato have become pretty familiar with life in this village now," he stated.

"Okay. In that case, you can leave them to us," Sara said, with Orphia and Alma nodding along at Rio.

"Yes. It's thanks to all of you that I can leave without worrying."

"Ehehe. Don't forget I'm here, too, Onii-chan," Latifa said,

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tugging on Rio's sleeve from where she sat to his right.

"Yeah. I'm counting on you as well, Latifa," Rio nodded, offering Latifa a gentle smile.

With a happy laugh, Latifa's ears and tail flicked from side to side. "Yup, leave it to me!"

"And so, I'll be leaving you three in the care of this village. There may be some developments with regard to the heroes that were summoned, so I'll investigate those too before I return," Rio said, looking at Miharu's group.

"Yes, please. But… Please make sure you don't endanger yourself when doing so… Don't push yourself too hard?" Miharu bowed her head apologetically before looking up at Rio's expression with worry.

"It'll be fine. I'll be with Haruto," Aishia said to Miharu, quiet but determined.

"I see. If Ai-chan is with him, then I'm relieved," Miharu smiled calmly.

"Which means Rio and Lady Aishia will be on a journey alone, huh…" Alma murmured. Beside her, Sara's expression changed with a gasp.

Orphia was watching their reactions with a smile when she suddenly remembered something. "Come to think of it, you originally went to the Strahl region because you had business there, right? Do you have old acquaintances there?" she asked Rio.

"Yes. There's actually a teacher I am greatly indebted to. I wanted to go and see them again," Rio replied, a faraway look in his eyes filled with fond memories.

"Was this a teacher from the kingdom that put out arrest warrants for your false accusation…?" Aki guessed, recalling the story Rio had previously told them about.

"Yeah. It's my teacher from when I lived in that kingdom."

"…Say, Haruto, are you actually a noble?" Masato asked hesitantly.

"No, I'm not… Why do you ask?"

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“Because you said you were dragged into the mess of some royalty and nobility.”

“Ah. That’s because certain circumstances led me to attending an academy for nobles.”

“So your teacher was a noble? Will it be okay for you to visit them?” Masato asked worriedly.

“It’ll be fine. I have utmost faith in them.” Rio shook his head cheerfully. It was a gesture that showed how much trust he truly had in this person, which was why it caught Sara’s attention. “Umm, Rio… May I ask what kind of person your teacher was?” The others also turned their ears toward the conversation in interest.

“Despite being fairly young, my teacher was an excellent sorcerer, professor, and researcher. But underneath all that was a warm and kind personality, albeit a little clumsy at times. I stood out in the academy for not being of a noble status, but they were the only one that didn’t discriminate against me.” A gentle smile was fixed on Rio’s face as he thought about Celia and recalled his former teacher’s personality.

“…When you say fairly young, around how many years old do you mean?”

“If I recall correctly… Twenty-one years old this year.”

“That really is young… It’s not too far from me in age. So that means this person started teaching in their early teens?” Sara asked one question after another.

“Yes. My teacher graduated from the same academy, skipping grades and scoring the highest marks in history. They first started teaching at Masato’s age.”

“That’s amazing. Your teacher really must be talented,” Sara said. Rio’s answer had made everyone at the table widen their eyes.

“Yeah, they must be a genius. I can’t even imagine you teaching someone else.”

“You’re only one year older than me, Aki!” Aki and Masato

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bickered while glaring at each other, while Sara spoke up with another question.

“Umm, is your former teacher by any chance a woman…?” she asked fearfully.

“Yes, that’s right. She was the daughter of a count. No, she may already be married into another family by now…” The possibility of Celia being married suddenly crossed Rio’s mind, but he decided the chances were low and smiled wryly. She had often whined that she didn’t want to think about anything other than her research.

“A count? If I recall correctly, that’s a high ranking noble family in the system that the humans of the Strahl region decided upon. So Rio knew someone like that…” Sara said, quietly humming to herself in contemplation.

“Typical Onii-chan. Looks like an unexpected obstacle has appeared, huh?” Latifa turned to murmur quietly to Sara and Alma sitting nearby, but she had a somewhat delighted smile on her face. Sara and Alma cleared their throats quickly.

“…At any rate, there’s no need for you to worry about us, Rio. Please go make your way toward Strahl without any reserve. I pray that you can meet your teacher,” Sara concluded, feigning calmness.

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Two days later, in the early morning hours, Rio and Aishia were in the town square, being sent off by a group of their close friends. Once everyone present had more or less all said their goodbyes, Dryas came over.

“Aishia, make sure you support Rio properly,” she said.

“Yeah. Thank you, Dryas, for teaching me so many things during our stay,” Aishia replied.

Dryas gave a small shrug of her shoulders. “I simply taught you how to use your power and the fundamental

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basics of being a humanoid spirit. You're very talented, so you remembered things quickly."

"Allow me to thank you, too, Great Dryas," Rio spoke up.

Dryas shook her head in a friendly manner. "It's fine, it's fine. However, Aishia seems to be so powerful, it makes it hard for her to suppress her aura when she's in her physical form. Just keep that in mind. Her aura should be pretty much undetectable when she's in her spirit form or inside your rock house with the same barrier as the village, though," she warned. Spirits could detect each others' presences, and it seemed like Aishia's was particularly strong.

"...I'll remember that, thank you," Rio nodded with a solemn expression.

"Well, you don't need to be too nervous about it. There are barely any stray spirits in the Strahl region, and there aren't many spirits who would voluntarily approach a higher-ranked spirit, either. You should just let Aishia do as she wants," Dryas said, smiling gently.

"Okay," Rio said with a nod.

"That's all I have to say to you. Go and pay attention to those children now," Dryas giggled, looking over at where Miharu and Sara stood with the others in wait. That was when Latifa jumped forth from the waiting circle.

"Have a safe trip, Onii-chan!" she exclaimed, hugging him first.

"I'll be going now. Everyone, take care of yourselves." Rio patted Latifa gently on the head before addressing the others.

"Yes, be careful. Oh, and it seems like Miharu has a present for you?" Sara said cheerfully, looking at Miharu.

"Ah, yes. Umm, I made this lunchbox, so... Umm, please take it, if you'd like." Miharu stepped forward shyly and offered a wrapped lunchbox to Rio.

"...Thank you very much. But when did you have the time

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for this?” Rio’s eyes widened as he accepted the package.

“Miharu woke up really early to make it,” Orphia said, grinning as she looked at Miharu. Alma also looked at her with a tranquil gaze.

“It was a good display of your housewife skills, Miharu.”

“N-No, not at all. I just figured a lunch would come in handy on a trip…” Miharu shook her head in embarrassment. Rio grinned happily.

“…I’ll gratefully accept this, Miharu. Thank you.”

“N-No worries. I hope it suits your tastes,” Miharu said, blushing further.

“Hohoho. I am most envious, Lord Rio,” Ursula interrupted with a hearty laugh.

“I’ll say. A sensible woman with good cooking skills is quite the catch, Rio, my boy.” Dominic also burst into hearty laughter as he joined in on what Ursula had to say.

To hide his embarrassment, Rio lightly brushed off Ursula’s and Dominic’s remarks. “Ahaha, thank you for coming to see me off, too, head elders. I’ll be going now.”

“Indeed, make sure to take care of yourself. May the blessing of the spirits guide your way, Lord Rio… Oh, and Lady Aishia, too. You could say you’ve already been extremely blessed to begin with,” Syldora said, smiling with amusement.

“Right. *Conservo*.” With a chuckle, Rio stored away the lunchbox into the Time-Space Cache. Then he looked at Aishia standing beside him. “Shall we go, Aishia? Make sure you stay beside me,” he said.

“Leave it to me.” Aishia said, quietly but determinedly.

“All right, we’ll be going, then! Thank you for coming to see us off so early in the morning,” Rio said, then kicked off from the ground and slowly floated up into the sky. Waving his hand, he looked down upon the remaining people below. Aishia soon ascended beside him.

The two of them continued to raise their altitude until Rio

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suddenly noticed Miharu looking fixedly up in their direction.

…Miharu.

He didn't know if she could still see them, but he smiled gently until she was out of sight. Once they rose high enough, Rio turned to Aishia.

"Let's go, Aishia."

"Yeah."

After Aishia nodded in response, the two of them set off immediately. They accelerated, heading straight in the direction of the Strahl region.

Down on the ground below, Miharu watched their retreating backs grow smaller and smaller.

Please let Haruto and Ai-chan return safely. She continued to look up at the sky, praying for the safety of their journey for a while after their figures had faded.

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Chapter 3: To Strahl Again

Two weeks had passed since Rio and Aishia left the spirit folk village. Perhaps it was a result of Miharu's prayers, but their journey was remarkably smooth. They arrived in the Strahl region unscathed, having not run into any dangerous encounters along the way.

Their current location was the eastern tip of the Kingdom of Beltrum, in a forest on Marquess Rodan's territory. Rio and Aishia descended in a random area of forest when the sun began to set, setting up the rock house and settling down for the day. After that, they immediately prepared dinner and sat down facing each other at the table.

"We'll arrive in the capital of Beltrant by tomorrow afternoon, so let's go over our plans one more time," Rio said to Aishia.

"Okay."

"First thing tomorrow morning, we'll head straight for the kingdom capital. Once we arrive, we'll gather as much information as we can about the hero summoning while it's still bright out. Then, at night, we'll sneak into the academy and visit Professor Celia's research laboratory. If her room hasn't changed over the years, then we should be able to meet her there."

"Got it," Aishia acknowledged quietly.

"Professor Celia may know something about the heroes, so we'll also ask her if she knows anything about Miharu's friends, Sendo Takahisa and Sumeragi Satsuki. I may introduce you to her, too, but it depends on how complicated the discussion may get. Can I leave that decision until after we meet her?"

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“Yeah. I’ll change into my spirit form and focus on guarding your surroundings,” Aishia said, volunteering herself as a lookout. Since she couldn’t be seen in her spirit form, being a lookout was the perfect role for her.

“Thanks, that’d be great. Now, since we’ll be getting up early tomorrow, let’s call it a night now. We were flying all day with only a few breaks, after all,” Rio said, smiling gently.

“Yeah, let’s get a lot of sleep,” Aishia nodded with a dazed expression. It seemed like she was sleepy already.

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The next afternoon, Rio and Aishia arrived at the capital of the Kingdom of Beltrum. They set up the rock house on the outskirts of the city as a landmark in advance and headed into the city.

At the moment, they were at the entrance of the main street leading to the business district inside the castle walls.

“Now, arriving at the capital is one thing, but…” Rio gazed at the street crowded with people and muttered to himself.

“What’s wrong?” Aishia tilted her face that was hidden by her hood and asked. Her appearance tended to attract attention, so Rio had ordered her to put a hood on. Rio, on the other hand, wasn’t wearing his hood.

“No, I was just thinking… It’s gotten a lot more lively here. It used to be pretty populated in the past, but… Let’s ask around in some stalls around here,” Rio answered with an unconvinced expression, suggesting they get a move on.

“Yeah,” Aishia nodded, reaching out to grab Rio’s left hand so that they wouldn’t be separated in the crowds. Rio gently held Aishia’s hand back.

The two of them stepped onto the crowded road, but it was difficult to make progress down the main street, so they decided to enter a random store and gather some

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information.

“There are no empty stalls around here. Let’s try going into an alley.” With a strained smile, Rio pulled Aishia by the hand and led her to a back alleyway.

“The alleys are crowded, too, but the stores at least have seats. Let’s enter one of them,” he said, wandering further into the alley. As he expected, there were more empty seats in the shops around there instead.

“We haven’t had lunch yet, so let’s get something to eat.”

“Okay… That one smells nice.” Aishia sniffed in the air and followed the scent before pointing out a shop. It appeared to be a stall selling sandwiches where a group of people were accepting their freshly made meals.

“Then let’s go with that,” Rio said, moving toward the stall.

He gave his order to a girl around twelve or thirteen years of age behind the counter. “Excuse me. I’d like to take two, please.”

“…” The girl took one glance at Rio and froze as though she was captivated by him.

“…Is something the matter?” Rio asked curiously.

“Oh, no, two orders it is. Please wait a moment. Mom, two please!” The girl shook her head with a faint blush on her cheeks before passing the order on to her mother behind the counter, where she was preparing the food.

“Yes sir, please wait a moment!” The girl’s mother gave a friendly nod and immediately began preparing the ingredients. She looked to be in her early thirties — still fairly young and with refined facial features.

…*Hm?* Rio looked at the woman’s face and felt a strange sensation similar to deja-vu, but he couldn’t think of a reason why, so he let it go and returned his thought process to his main objective.

“The main street is filled with crowds of people. Is it always that busy?” he asked the girl.

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“Oh, I think some really high class nobles are getting married tomorrow, so lots of people are visiting from outside the capital. There’ll be some big celebrations and even a parade, or something. Because of that, even a stall located off the beaten path like us is getting customers, so we are very grateful,” she answered with a happy smile.

“Tomorrow… I see. May I ask which noble family…?” If it was a really high class noble, then there was a chance he knew of the family too.

“Umm, who was it again? Something like Ar… Ar…” The girl couldn’t quite recall the name, inclining her head as she searched through her memory.

“…The Duke Arbor family?”

The girl’s expression brightened as she nodded. “Ah, that’s it! It’s a noble by that name.”

“I see. That is indeed a high class family,” Rio said, recalling what he knew of the kingdom’s politics.

Holding the ceremony during a parade… Is it a show of power? The Second Princess’ kidnapping incident nine years ago should have caused Duke Arbor’s influence to decline greatly, at least up until I left the kingdom… Was there a shift in the political powers of the kingdom after I left? If I recall correctly… Professor Celia’s family was part of the Fontaine faction that was especially loyal to the king. Comparing the balance of the past with the present, he formed a hypothesis on what was happening.

“Umm, you really seem to know a lot about nobles, mister,” the girl said, looking up at Rio’s face hesitantly.

Rio’s eyes widened for a moment before he picked up on what the girl was implying and reassured her with an amused smile. “Hm? Yeah, but I’m not a noble, so you don’t have to be scared.”

“Ah, no! That’s not what I meant! I just thought you spoke really prettily, so I was wondering… It wasn’t that I thought you were one… Umm, you don’t have to talk to someone like

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me so politely. Ah, my name is Sophie, by the way!" The girl blushed, explaining herself with flustered gestures. On top of that, she introduced herself for some reason.

"What's wrong, Sophie? Here, it's done. Hand it to the customer." The food had been completed and Sophie's mother's voice could be heard from the back.

"Ah, okay Mom. Here... Thank you for waiting, mister!" Sophie accepted the completed sandwich and offered it to Rio with a bow.

"I apologize for my daughter's rudeness, sir." Sophie's mother also bowed her head deeply at Rio.

"No, you have a very cute and friendly daughter there. I enjoyed our conversation very much." Rio shook his head with a smile.

Sophie's mother sighed quietly in relief. "I'm glad to hear that, then."

"If you don't mind me asking, have you had this store here for a long time?" Rio suddenly asked.

"Yes, it's been around five years now. I started when this child was still young," the girl's mother answered with a slightly curious look.

Ah, I see now. No wonder... A smile tugged at Rio's lips as it all clicked in place.

"I see. I believe I may have visited this store once before, back then. No wonder I felt a strange sense of deja-vu when I saw the front of the store. I remember your daughter was tending to the store back then, too," he said, explaining his sudden realization.

Sophie twitched in surprise at the mention of herself. "Oh my, is that so? Thank you very much for your continued patronage," she thanked him happily, having no recollection of Rio.

The last time Rio had visited this store, he had been preparing for his journey to leave the kingdom after receiving his arrest warrants. Rio had grown a lot since then,

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with different colored hair to boot, so it was understandable that the mother and daughter wouldn't recognize him.

"No, not at all. Here's the money. Aishia, here."

"Thank you," Aishia nodded, accepting the sandwich and taking a small bite of it immediately. "...It's delicious."

"Please feel free to have a seat as you eat," Sophie's mother said with a pleased smile, stepping out from the back of the stall and setting up seats for Rio and Aishia beside the counter.

"Well, if you don't mind." Rio and Aishia both accepted the seats offered to them. Rio took a bite of the sandwich first.

"Wow, this is really good."

The bread was a firm type of baguette and the fillings were a mix of meat and vegetables that were seasoned with meat juice and a salty sauce; it filled his mouth with rich flavor.

"Thank you very much. Please, take your time eating," Sophie's mother said, returning to the stall. Sophie occasionally shot glances over at Rio and Aishia. Eventually, Rio felt awkward enough to speak up.

"Umm, Sophie?" he asked.

"Y-Yes! How can I help you, mister?" Sophie replied happily.

"If I'm not disturbing your work, there's one more thing I'd like to ask..."

"As long as no other customers are around, feel free!"

"Do you know anything about the hero that was summoned around four months ago?"

"Oh, there was a huge fuss about that for a while. A huge pillar of light shot up from the royal castle, so that kind of reaction makes sense!" Sophie said elatedly, recalling the events that occurred.

"The... has this kingdom officially announced the existence of the hero?"

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“Yes — the castle issued a proclamation to the people.”

“Huh… Do you know the name of that hero, by any chance?” Rio asked with interest, but Sophie shook her head apologetically.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know the hero’s name…”

“I see… That’s all right. Thank you for telling me,” Rio said, resuming his meal. Aishia continued to chew on her sandwich in an adorable manner next to him.

“Thank you for the meal — it was truly delicious. I’ll drop by again if we’re ever nearby, so maybe we’ll meet again,” Rio said once they had finished their food several minutes later, leaving the store behind him.

“Yes, please come again anytime!” Sophie and her mother saw Rio and Aishia off cheerfully.

“What a lovely couple they were,” Sophie’s mother — a woman named Angela — said to her daughter.

“Yeah. I only saw a little bit of her face under the hood, but that lady was really beautiful…” Sophie agreed with a mix of fascination and jealousy.

“Fufu, it’d be nice if we could meet again,” Angela said, smiling amusedly.

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After lunchtime, Rio and Aishia continued to walk through the market in search of information. The sky gradually grew darker; eventually, all the stores closed up shop for the day. Instead, inns and bars started to bustle with life, but the two travelers had no business with those establishments.

Rio walked down the much less crowded main street beside Aishia. “All right, I guess we’ve gathered as much information from the market as we can for now. Sorry I had you accompany me for so long. Thank you, Aishia,” he said, offering words of appreciation to Aishia for keeping him

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company the entire time.

“I didn’t do anything. All the information was gathered by you, Haruto.” Aishia shook her head with a calm voice.

“No, having you beside me helped make people less wary when talking to me. You were a big help.”

“I’m glad to hear that, then.”

Though she had her face hidden by the hood the entire time, it was easy to tell Aishia was a woman from close up because of her figure. A man and woman walking together was easy to mistake for a couple, and a few of the store attendants were more willing to chat after being distracted by the glimpse of Aishia’s beauty that they caught. It was all thanks to Aishia that their bout of information gathering went so smoothly.

“I was thinking of going to the academy next, as planned. But if you’re tired, you can go and rest first…”

“It’s okay. I’ll go too. If we’re sneaking in, my spirit form might be useful,” Aishia offered without any sign of reluctance.

“…Then I’ll take your word for it and count on you. Let’s hurry, shall we?” Rio smiled with a mix of gratitude and guilt at Aishia’s devotion, before resuming their walk toward their objective. They were, of course, headed for the Royal Academy of Beltrum, where Rio once attended and Celia’s research lab was located below the library tower.

However, the academy grounds were deep inside the noble area surrounded by castle walls, adjacent to the castle itself, so there was no entering from the front. That inevitably meant they had to sneak in instead, but Rio and Aishia had access to spirit arts to make that task much easier.

The two of them went around the wall to locate a relatively unguarded location and leaped into the air with spirit arts, easily clearing the ten-meter-tall castle walls. They had waited until dark simply because it was easier to

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sneak around with the cover of night; there was no way they could have flown through the air so recklessly during the day.

"This way." Rio jumped down to the roof of a moderately sized building and enhanced his body with spirit arts. Then, he burst into a light run across the rooftops of the noble district with Aishia bringing up the rear. With that pacing, they arrived at the academy in a matter of minutes.

As a former student, Rio made his way around the school grounds without hesitation. The number of guards were also fewer than the noble district, so they were able to reach the library tower with ease. Two guards stood at the entrance of the library tower, but with no sign of anything amiss, they didn't seem very motivated about their jobs at all.

"There's a terrace on the second floor at the back. The lock on the window there used to be easy to break, so let's try that. If we can't get it to open, you can enter in your spirit form and just unlock it."

"Got it." Rio and Aishia leaped up to the second floor terrace.

"I believe it was around here... Oh, it'd be faster to just get you to go inside in the first place, wouldn't it?" Rio stood before the wooden window and looked at Aishia with a wry smile. She could also check if there was anyone inside.

"Yup, leave it to me," Aishia nodded, dematerializing her form and disappearing from sight. Less than ten seconds later, a click sounded from inside as the window unlocked and creaked open.

"Come in. There's no one inside."

"...Thanks, Aishia. You made this so much easier than I was expecting," Rio laughed, then climbed into the library tower and closed the window once more, locking it shut.

"Let's go. Professor Celia's lab is underground."

They refocused themselves on the task at hand and headed downstairs. There were no guards inside the library

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tower, but there would be researchers working overnight — they couldn't afford to let their guards down.

This sure brings back memories, Rio thought to himself as they walked down the familiar underground corridor. They advanced down the illuminated hallway, dimly lit by the light of magic artifacts, until they reached the room Celia used as her research laboratory. The name plate on the door was still carved with the name *Celia Claire*.

It's still her name. Rio broke into a grin, then took a deep breath and quietly knocked. However, the inside of the room remained silent, with no sign of a reaction for several seconds.

"...Is she out?" He knocked once more to check before his expression fell with a frown.

"I'll take a look," Aishia said, turning into her spirit form. Her body scattered into particles of light and dispersed.

No such thing as privacy with her, huh? He hadn't realized it before as she was usually in her physical form, but she could really abuse that ability if she wanted. Rio would have to have a talk with her about when and where it was appropriate to invade someone's privacy — and who, of course, he thought with a wry smile. Soon after, the light particles gathered once more to form Aishia's figure.

"Celia isn't there. It's completely deserted," Aishia reported.

"You mean she's gone home for the day?"

"No. At the very least, the room hasn't been used at all recently. Most of the things in the room have been removed."

Rio placed a hand against his mouth with a contemplative look. "...Looks like we'll need to investigate this a little more," he murmured in thought.

"What do we do?"

"It might be a little risky, but let's see if there are any other researchers around and cast a spell on them. For now,

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let's search as many of the research labs on this floor as we can," Rio replied.

"Okay. I'll search in my spirit form."

Rio paused for a moment. "That's probably the least risky option. Can I ask you to get to that right away?"

"Leave it to me." Aishia immediately took on her spirit form and set about on her task. Then, less than a minute later, she materialized once more before Rio.

"This way, Haruto," she said, leading Rio to the room she had marked.

"Thank you. What's inside?"

"A middle-aged researcher. I'll enter the room and cast an illusion on him before calling you, so come inside after that," Aishia said. Illusion arts were a type of spirit arts that affected the five senses of perception of a person. For example, planting suggestions into someone's mind was also considered a form of illusion arts. There were many different kinds of illusions, the most difficult and powerful of which were capable of making the other party experience what was, in short, a waking dream.

However, as illusion arts required time to cast, its effect was weakened when met with resistance — to the point where it could be completely repelled. In addition to requiring a great amount of skill in spirit arts to perform, it was also extremely difficult to use it in a practical way. Therefore, it was best to cast illusion arts when the other party was unaware of it.

Even if an illusion was forcibly cast, the illusion would be noticed the moment any resistance was met. Therefore, even if the art was successfully activated, the utility of the illusion was essentially ruined.

With all that in mind, Rio nodded uneasily. "...You're right. It'd be better for you to cast the illusion arts in your spirit form, Aishia," he said with a small sigh. "Remember, we've snuck into this academy in search of information

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about Professor Celia. We can't have anyone realize that, so you need to put him into a dream state before he resists."

If they could place him under a dream state before he noticed them, his memories of Rio and Aishia would be hazy even after the illusion wore off. Rio was capable of casting the illusion arts himself, but after considering the time lag between opening the door and approaching the researcher, he decided it was more reliable to have Aishia do it.

"It'll be fine, don't worry." Aishia didn't seem to have any concerns at all, as her response to him was blunt.

"...Yeah. If it's you, then I don't need to worry." Rio gave a faint smile as he relaxed.

"Yup," Aishia nodded, dispersing into particles of light again. Then, after a short while...

Come inside, Haruto, Aishia's voice echoed in Rio's head.

Rio immediately opened the door without knocking; a single middle-aged man sat at his desk in the room. Beside him stood Aishia, her hand held up against the man's head.

"Hey." The researcher seemed to perceive Rio's entrance and called out to him in a friendly manner. However, his eyes were unfocused and had a dazed look about them.

He thinks you're an important work-related visitor. If you want to ask him your questions, he should answer them properly — to the extent of his knowledge, at least. Aishia explained to Rio via telepathy. Rio gave her a brief thanks and began to question the man sitting before him.

"I have business with Professor Celia Claire. Where can I find her?" he asked.

"Shouldn't she be in the castle?" the man replied casually.

"The castle... Why would she be there?"

"Hahaha. Duke Arbor's faction may have regained their power, but the kingdom's internal affairs are still very much unstable. They're probably being wary of Duke Huguenot's faction, what with the upcoming wedding ceremony and all."

"...Wedding? Of who?" Rio almost doubted his hearing.

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“Celia’s, of course. She’ll be wed to Sir Charles of Duke Arbor’s house,” the researcher stated the fact simply.

“Charles?! Charles Arbor and Professor Celia?” Rio’s jaw dropped, his shock making his words come out louder than intended.

His reaction made sense — Charles Arbor was the same person who forcefully tortured Rio under the name of interrogation during the incident where the Second Princess Flora was kidnapped. It went without saying that Rio didn’t have a very good impression of Charles.

“Well, it’s your standard political marriage. Celia’s family is from the Fontaine faction… Or rather, the faction recognized as the leading nobles with regard to their support of His Majesty. With the Huguenot faction chased out of the capital right now, they’re the perfect marriage candidate to increase the Arbor family’s power. And though it pains me to admit it, Celia’s worth as a genius researcher also gives her a high value as a wife,” the man explained.

“Professor Celia… No, the Count Claire family also wanted this political marriage?”

“That’s anyone’s guess… But with the current state of the kingdom, it wouldn’t be smart to turn down a request from the Arbor faction. It would have benefited Count Claire’s house more to side with the winners, so to speak.”

Rio took a deep breath and calmed himself down on the surface before continuing his line of questioning. “…I see. But I still don’t quite understand why she is living in the castle. What do you mean by being wary of Duke Huguenot’s faction?”

“The Huguenot faction is currently being treated as a rebel faction in this kingdom and have hidden themselves. But their power cannot be underestimated. A link between the Duke Arbor and Count Claire families would be most undesirable to them, so the families probably feared for Celia’s safety. It was for those reasons that she was taken to

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the castle."

"I see, so that's what happened… I suppose it would be easier to guard the castle…" Rio muttered with a grimace.

I guess a lot of political disputes occurred after I left the kingdom, huh? And because of that, Professor Celia ended up with the short end of the stick… He felt ashamed of his own ignorance of Celia's predicament, though he couldn't have known otherwise.

"…The wedding ceremony was to take place tomorrow, right?"

"Yes. There'll be a grand parade and all," the researcher confirmed with a nod.

Rio took another deep breath to calm himself down as much as he could. Then, he changed the subject. "On another note, could I ask you a few things about the dispute that happened with the Proxia Empire, in which the king and the Huguenot faction lost their power?" he asked.

There was no mistaking the fact that the shift in internal politics was what had prompted Celia's marriage, but he needed to have a more accurate grasp of the situation.

"Mm… I'm not very interested in politics, so I'd just be repeating what I've heard from others."

"That's fine."

"The dispute in question happened roughly half a year ago." The Proxia Empire was a large military nation located to the north of Beltrum. The former mercenary and current first-generation emperor, Nidol Proxia, rose to power when he killed the king of a small kingdom forty years ago. He had since absorbed numerous small, northern countries and their armies, rapidly developing Proxia into the current empire. Because of their track record, the neighboring kingdoms became inevitably wary of the empire. Those sharing borders with Proxia — including Beltrum and Galarc — also had a history of getting into frequent skirmishes dating back to the first founding of the empire.

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Despite this, ever since a military alliance of several kingdoms led by Beltrum and Galarc was formed to oppose Proxia, the tension between the alliance kingdoms and the empire had at least been reduced to a stalemate.

“The conservative approach His Majesty and Duke Huguenot had maintained for so long became their downfall as Proxia launched a daring invasion of one of our kingdom’s key locations. Our troops had their station captured and had to admit defeat.” The invasion had greatly changed the tension between Beltrum and Proxia.

“I don’t know the details of the retreat, but I heard the Proxia Empire’s strongest army, the Winged Knights, played a huge part in their victory. In any case, that was when Duke Arbor made his appearance. He hounded His Majesty and Duke Huguenot for responsibility over the seized location and had since taken over the role of negotiations with the Proxia Empire, which have been going fairly well.” As the researcher also doubled as a professor of the academy, his explanation was well arranged and easy to follow.

“After that, while I’m not sure of the particulars involved, it was thanks to Duke Arbor that our kingdom succeeded in making peace with Proxia. That Duke Arbor’s influence and esteem within our kingdom shot up, allowing him to turn most of the nobility in the royal court on his side and duly purge the Huguenot faction with just cause. He used that momentum to criticize His Majesty and seized a portion of his power.”

“Criticizing the king must have been quite a bold move to make…”

“That was how disadvantaged His Majesty’s position was. His Majesty has been stuck dealing with the faction rivalry ever since the former king passed away.” The researcher spoke of the issue objectively and sighed. He seemed to have the minimum amount of expected knowledge regarding noble society, but he truly didn’t seem to be interested in

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politics.

“On another note, do you know the name of the hero that was summoned recently?” He didn’t know when someone might visit this laboratory, so they couldn’t afford to chat for too long. Rio decided to quickly ask what he needed to know right then and there in a blunt manner.

“Ah, what was it again? I believe it was… Rui. Yes, it was Rui Shigekura.”

“Rui Shigekura, you say? Right, thank you very much.” While it was certainly a Japanese-sounding name, it was not the person Miharu and the others were searching for. After that, Rio confirmed a few more things with the man.

“That’s all. If you’d please excuse me,” he said.

“It was my pleasure.” The man shook his head amicably and saw Rio off. The illusion would wear off later, clearing his mind but leaving the impression that he had been napping.

“What will we do?” Aishia asked Rio after they left the room.

“…There are still some missing points in the timeline of the marriage, but there’s no time. I want to meet Professor Celia before the ceremony, so let’s sneak into the castle immediately.” It’d be easiest to hear the details of what happened from Celia’s own mouth.

“Then let me help, too. I’ll locate the room Celia’s staying in inside the castle.”

“Thanks. The castle is right next to this academy. If it’s just entering the grounds, then it shouldn’t be too hard, but…” The problem was locating exactly which room Celia was staying in. The inside of the castle was spacious and had many rooms, almost all of which Rio was unfamiliar with.

It doesn’t seem like there’s any kind of barrier set up around the perimeter, so the problem will be the interior… Especially inside the castle itself…

There was a technique using advanced wind spirit arts

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that could erase his figure from view, but it required moving at a walking pace to perform successfully. It also risked triggering any magic essence detectors and giving away their location, so he had to think carefully. They probably would have been able to break their way in and escape without an issue, but then the security would be tightened and make it harder to reach Celia.

"I'll turn into my spirit form and search through the castle alone. That way, the risk of detection is lower," Aishia uttered simply.

"...The inside of the castle will have zones with restricted entry, so they may have ways of detecting suspicious sources of essence. Ignoring the characteristic aura you emit as a physical spirit, won't you be a mass of ode and mana in your spirit form? Are you sure?" They had considered this risk when they were sneaking into the academy too, but the royal castle was more likely to be guarded carefully in comparison.

"It's no problem. If there's any kind of barrier that detects magic essence, I'll be able to detect it first. And the humans of the Strahl region typically can't perceive essence, so my spirit aura shouldn't be an issue, either. Plus, I don't feel any spirits around here. As far as the radius of my detection reaches, anyway."

"Dryas also said that wild spirits rarely ever appear in Strahl," Rio noted.

"Most spirits are cowardly by nature, so they tend to avoid human habitats. The spirit folk who live together with spirits are actually an extreme exception, according to Dryas."

"I see... Then can I rely on you once more, Aishia?" Rio requested reluctantly. He felt sorry for depending on Aishia so much, but they had to search as efficiently as possible right now.

"Yup," Aishia agreed without missing a beat.

"Thank you. Let's head to the castle right away, then."

The two of them set off toward the castle.

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Interlude: Celia's Woes

Some time before Rio and Aishia infiltrated the academy…

In a separate building from the guest house located on the castle grounds, Celia was having supper in the dining hall with her father, Roland Claire, and her fiance, Charles Arbor.

"…It's been a long time, Celia. I'm sorry I haven't been able to see you very often until now, even with your wedding ceremony coming up tomorrow." Seated across from Celia, Roland apologized to his daughter with a grimace. His gaze flickered over to Charles Arbor and the knights that were standing in the room as guards, their presence intruding on the long-awaited private moment between a father and daughter.

"I understand, Father. I'm sure you were busy with your official duties… Just being able to see you like this is enough for me." Celia smiled fondly and shook her head.

"I'm sure it was unavoidable — these are busy times, after all. I haven't been able to meet my beloved Celia much either, despite the approaching ceremony," Charles said tiredly from beside Celia.

A vein in Roland's temple twitched. "…With the departure of the Huguenot faction from the capital, the state of the kingdom has become rather chaotic. I cannot help but worry that moving forth with the ceremony during times like these will cause you undue stress," he said to the two of them worriedly, pasting a grin on his face.

"No, no. It is precisely *because* they have fled with their tails between their legs that there is meaning in holding the

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ceremony right now. It is as I told you before — this marriage between the Arbor House and the Claire House will show those both inside and outside the kingdom that Beltrum's power is flawless."

"I understand that, but... It's my duty as a parent to worry." Roland nodded, stifling his discomfort.

"Children all grow up one day. Celia understands that well herself, so there is no need for concern," Charles said with a huff of laughter, looking at Celia.

"...Yes, I am aware," Celia agreed obediently. With a sigh, Roland tried to seem convinced.

"I see..."

"Besides, the Huguenot faction took one of the sacred stones with them, so they should have a hero on their side, too... Which means they will definitely attempt to justify themselves with their hero. This wedding ceremony will also act as a form of control to those in the Huguenot faction. It is for that reason that we have called for the hero, Rui Shigekura, to officially bless our wedding." Charles frowned and spoke of Duke Huguenot's faction with hatred, but the latter half of his words were accompanied by a smug sneer.

"But to hold the ceremony in such a grand way with the parade... I hope you have sufficient security measures in place, in case the Huguenot faction intervenes," Roland said, looking at Celia with worry.

"There is no need for any concern there. The newly formed Elite Knights is assigned to our security detail, after all. There are also plans to add the Royal Guard to the security detail, too, under His Majesty's orders," Charles boasted.

"...I see... So it'll be an impenetrable formation."

"The Sorcerer Squad and Aerial Knights will also be on guard. All of them are the elites of our kingdom; if anyone attempted to pull something after seeing our security, that would be a suicidal move. Only ignorant fools with a death

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wish would try it. I look forward to seeing if anyone dares."

"I see…" Roland lowered his gaze and nodded with a hanging head.

Seeing Roland like that made Charles chuckle. "Well, just leave it all to me, Father-in-Law. There is no need for you to shoulder any of the burden," he said pleasantly.

"Far from shouldering anything. I haven't been involved in any aspect of the wedding ceremony so far… I've been relying completely on the Arbor family — or rather, you," Roland said with an apologetic smile.

"And that's how it should be. The house of Count Claire is already considered family by the Arbor House at this point. As long as you so rely on me, I shall look after Celia and your family."

"I am still young myself. I cannot simply rely on you for everything…"

"Of course, I expect the talented Count Claire to work on various matters after the wedding, so you may rest assured there."

"I see. I will do my best."

"Of course. Everything will get busier after the wedding, after all. Although, I do have one concern… but please relax and rest yourself for now," Charles said, speaking with a strange implication.

"…A concern, you say?" Roland asked. His instincts were telling him that the future would be more troublesome if he didn't choose to ask for more details now.

"It's the rumors that have been going around the royal court for some time now. The ones that suspect members of the Duke Fontaine faction — including you — to be secretly colluding with the Huguenot faction after their estrangement. As expected, most of them have quieted down after my engagement to Celia, but there are still some that are stubbornly hanging on out there. It's quite troubling, indeed," Charles said, shaking his head dramatically.

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You dare say that after setting everything up so that you could threaten this engagement into existence? Roland displayed a splendid amount of control in resisting the urge to furrow his brow.

"...I am truly saddened to hear that. To communicate with the rebels that discarded their duties in the royal court is on par with betraying the kingdom itself, after all. It is an unthinkable offense," he brushed off with a strained smile. He couldn't afford to be flustered here. Meanwhile, Celia's face paled as she froze stiff in her seat, staring at Roland opposite to her.

You mustn't make a face like that, my dear Celia. No... It is my failure which makes you look that way. I am so sorry. Roland met Celia's eyes for a brief moment before he reassumed his poker face.

"It is exactly as you say. Now that you are tied to the Arbor House, I had deep-seated fears that the rumors would continue to involve the Claire family... but if you're thinking that way, then my worries were quite unnecessary. In the end, rumors are just that: rumors. You'll be able to win over trust with your actions and attitude from here on out," Charles said cheerfully, nodding in an exaggerated manner.

"That would be most fortunate if so..." Roland agreed with Charles carefully, unsure of his intentions.

"It's simple. From now on, you will maintain your relationship with the nobles of your faction that you have associated with until now, while drawing an appropriate line of distance. On top of that, you'll have to watch them carefully for any hidden agendas," Charles stated as though it was a predetermined matter. In other words, he wanted a spy that moved under the orders of the Arbor House.

A predictable demand indeed, Roland thought to himself.

"...It is a duty far above what I deserve, but I understand. I shall do my best," Roland said, nodding deeply.

"I will have high expectations of you. If you produce the

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right results, Father and I will be more than happy to grant you more opportunities to prove yourself. For someone as intelligent as you, I don't even need to tell you that you'll have to accomplish something to win over those around you, am I correct?" Charles asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Yes, I will take care in the way I present myself."

So I won't be suspected of acting as a double agent, Roland added in his heart.

"Excellent. In that case, the house of Count Claire will continue living in peace, along with the future of my bride, the greatest genius sorcerer our kingdom has ever seen," Charles said dramatically, directing a smile at Celia.

"...Please do look after our family, Sir Charles. My father and I will devote ourselves to your vision." Celia put on the biggest smile she could as she bowed her head at Charles.

"I as well. Your results as my wife will reflect upon me in the future, too."

"I understand."

Charles nodded in satisfaction. "A good reply. I look forward to our lives together... Oh, yes. Speaking of that. I have yet to give you the opportunity to meet with my wives properly yet, have I?"

"Yes, though there are some I have met in my own time..."

"You've been shut away in here ever since our engagement was decided, I suppose. Ah, well. I shall set up some time for you to speak with them before the ceremony tomorrow. You'll be living together with them from now on, so do get along with them. My wives also wish to know you better."

"I understand. I shall look forward to it," Celia replied with a smile plastered on her face.

The uncomfortable conversation between the three of them continued for some time after that.

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Chapter 4: Reunion with Celia

Roughly one hour had passed since Rio and Aishia left the academy.

Rio was flying in the sky above the castle alone. His black overcoat completely camouflaged him against the night sky, making it nearly impossible for him to be spotted from the ground.

It's been quite a while since we snuck in... Does Aishia really know what Celia looks like? Rio thought, looking down at the enormous castle below.

Because Aishia had slept inside Rio for so long, she wouldn't have met with Celia before. Yet, for some reason, Aishia had stated that she knew Celia's face. Apparently, through the spiritual link that connected a contract spirit and contractee, it was possible for the contractee's memories to be read. If that was true, then it would explain why Aishia knew the face of someone she had never met, why she could speak Japanese, and why her martial arts techniques were so similar to Rio.

That being said, with how long had passed since she entered the castle alone, he couldn't help but worry about her. With nothing else to do, Rio was lost in his thoughts for a while, until a telepathic message arrived from Aishia.

Haruto, I found Celia.

Really?

Yup, Aishia replied. *She's located in a big building to the far left of the front gate. It's probably a guest house. There's an entire detached suite there that belongs to Celia. It seems*

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like she just finished dinner and is now back.

…All right. Is there any area where I can get inside?

There are lots of security guards inside the building and a few knights in front of Celia's room, so you should come in from the terrace. I'll guide you in my spirit form.

Thank you. I'll fly above the guest house first. Following Aishia's directions, Rio descended gracefully to the air above the guest house. From what he could see on the way, the security was indeed as harsh as one would expect of a royal castle. As he descended from the skies, he spotted security guards patrolling all over the place. However, with his ability to fly, it only took Rio half a minute to arrive above the guest house.

The guest house was a building constructed separately from the castle and set up so that it could only be accessed by going through the sturdy stone bridge that connected it to the castle. With the wedding ceremony approaching, the guest house had many visitors staying over, resulting in more security guards there than near the castle.

Celia is in a detached suite surrounded by a lake… The building closest to the castle, Aishia's voice echoed in Rio's head.

Got it. Over there— Rio identified the building immediately.

In order to reach the suite, one would normally have to use the dedicated suspension bridge, but Rio simply flew over with his spirit arts.

There are several knights in front of the door, so drop down to the roof first.

Okay, Rio replied, landing on the roof of the detached suite.

Celia's on the second floor. The corner room closer to the castle.

…This one?

Yes, Celia's room is directly below. There's a knight

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guarding the door, but Celia's the only one inside. Entering through the terrace would be a wise choice, Aishia directed through telepathy.

Understood. I'm going to drop down to the terrace, then.

Yeah. I'll unlock the window for you.

With a deep breath, Rio descended onto the terrace; then, the window of the room unlocked with a clicking sound. Aishia stood inside the room in her physical form.

This is her bedroom. Where's Professor Celia?

The other side of that door is a studio — Celia's in there. Aishia quietly pointed a finger at one of the several doors in the room.

Got it. I'll be back.

I'll be on lookout duty in my spirit form and let you know if anyone comes.

Okay. Thank you for everything, Aishia.

No problem. Aishia shook her head and turned into her spirit form once more; the particles of light scattered everywhere. Rio walked toward the door of Celia's studio and stopped before it.

I guess... it would be better not to knock. It wasn't very polite, but manners didn't matter when he was sneaking in.

Rio opened the door quietly.

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After finishing dinner and seeing off Roland and Charles, Celia headed straight for her room. In an estate as huge as this one, the only place she got any sense of privacy was her own room.

It was the first time I met with father in ages, yet we couldn't have any meaningful conversation... Celia thought with a gloomy face.

...But I'm glad I was able to confirm Father's safety. The worst case scenario was averted, it seems...

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Before Celia's engagement was decided, Count Claire had been secretly suspected of assisting Duke Huguenot in taking Second Princess Flora out of the capital, putting Count Claire in a precarious position himself. In order to clear that suspicion, it was decided that his daughter would wed Charles as a human sacrifice of sorts. And if he was allowed to meet her like how he did earlier, then it meant Roland's position had now recovered.

I've fulfilled my purpose of recovering my family's position, right? All that's left now is for me to be that man's hostage for the rest of my life. That's all. Yup, that's all there is to it... Celia bit down on her lip as she tried to convince herself. Now that the engagement was set in stone, it would be impossible for Charles and the Duke Arbor family behind him to treat Count Claire's family with disdain any longer, which was why all Celia had to do now was quietly become Charles' puppet.

That was all. She had already resigned herself to her fate.

But... But... Before the end... Before I get married... I wanted to see Rio, Celia thought desperately, her eyes drawn to the surface of the work desk in the room. There, a single letter lay among the research materials. It was a letter Rio had sent several months ago.

Celia picked up the letter and clutched it to her chest. It almost felt like Rio was beside her. She opened the envelope carefully and read it, despite having done so countless times. There was nothing special about the contents written down, but knowing that the characters were written by Rio made her heart yearn helplessly.

When Celia had received the letter, she was barely being allowed to remain in her research laboratory in the academy, which why she was able to bring it here along with her research materials without inspection. The letter she received four years ago was stored carefully here, too.

Lately, however, as she reread the letters, Celia noticed

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that she couldn't get Rio out of her mind.

I think… I used to like Rio. If only I realized back then…

If she had, they may have been able to create even better memories with each other. She may have been able to confess her feelings honestly to him.

Whenever those thoughts filled her head, Celia couldn't help but feel like crying.

However, it was all in the past. She would be getting married to another man tomorrow, and probably needed to get rid of the letters she received from her first love that she continued to stubbornly hold onto.

It may be best if we never meet again. These letters will just make me feel more distressed, so I should probably dispose of them now… Celia thought with a tearful expression.

They were easy to dispose of — all she had to do was rip them and burn them. Celia stared fixedly at the letters as she considered it, when a soft clicking noise from the only door in the room broke the silence in the air.

"W-Who's there?!" Celia asked with a start. She hurriedly mixed the letters among her research materials on the desk before looking at the door.

There stood a gray-haired boy in his mid-teens, dressed in a black coat.

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Rio slowly opened the door to Celia's studio, when her voice sounded from inside almost immediately.

"W-Who's there?!"

The room was warmly lit by the light of magic lamps; Rio caught a glimpse of Celia placing something on her desk in a fluster. "Quiet… It's me, Professor Celia." He pressed a finger against his lips to shush her.

"…Professor? Does that make you a student of the

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academy, then? How did you get inside? There should have been several knights standing guard, no?" Celia questioned him warily, backing away slowly as she did.

Was there a student like this before? A foreign child? she wondered to herself as she stared at Rio's face dubiously. His frame was masculine and his form was slender, but visibly toned. The boy's face was androgynous, with pretty and refined features, and his eyes had a gentle look to them.

However, there was something suspicious about him.

His face was fully revealed, yet his clothes didn't seem like someone who came here through any official procedures. Thus, Celia's first thought was that the person before her was a secret agent. It was typical for attractive men and women to be selected as spies, after all.

"I used to be a student of the academy. How I got here is a rather long story I'm going to omit for now. The knights are still guarding the outside of your room, so please rest assured," Rio replied, half amused.

"...A past student?" Celia's doubts grew stronger, but for some reason, his voice sounded somewhat familiar to her.

"It's me, Professor. Rio. I wrote a letter saying I'd come see you, did I not?" Rio said, chuckling.

"...Huh?" Celia's eyes widened as she froze.

"Long time no see, Professor Celia," Rio said, removing his necklace so that his hair would change from gray to black. Celia blinked blankly several times as she stared at his face.

"Ah... eh? R... Rio?" she muttered, quite shaken.

He definitely looked like the person in question; the second his hair turned black the resemblance became striking. No wonder his voice had sounded familiar. Even if his voice had changed during puberty, he still sounded like Rio.

"...Professor? Did I surprise you too much?" Rio tilted his head with a troubled look, peering at the flustered Celia. Her

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eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Is that really you, Rio?" she asked in a trembling voice, desperately holding back from outwardly crying.

Rio smiled gently and nodded. "Yes, I returned just like I promised. It's been nearly four years, hasn't it… oh."

Celia suddenly jumped at Rio's chest, and he caught her body, gently.

"Rio… it's really you. It's really you, Rio?!" Celia asked him, raising her face from his chest.

She didn't care why Rio was in this room right now; the bigger problem was whether the person before her was really Rio, or whether he was just an illusion she was hallucinating.

"Yes, it really is." Rio nodded gently.

Celia touched Rio's body and buried her face in his chest. "…Yeah, you're warm. You smell like Rio, too. This isn't a dream, right?" she asked nervously.

"Yes, this isn't a dream. It's me. I'm alive. I missed you, Professor." Rio hesitantly wound his arms around Celia's back.

"I missed you, too… I wanted to see you… I wanted to see you so much. You've grown up so much in such a short time…" Celia looked up at Rio happily, eyes glistening.

"Me too… But you haven't changed at all, Professor," Rio said, grinning down at her mischievously. She remained in a daze for a moment.

"Huh? W-What are you saying? Geez. You're the one who grew too much. I became a little more ladylike, too, I'll have you know!" She puffed up her cheeks and glared at Rio.

"Yes, you're beautiful." Rio simply nodded happily.

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“...?! There you go again, saying things like that...” Celia blushed bright red and buried her face in Rio’s chest once more. Then, after a moment, she started hitting his chest to shake off her embarrassment.

“It’s true. You’re just as youthful as you used to be, Professor... But you’ve become more beautiful.” Rio shook his head gently, speaking in a gentle tone.

“Ugh... I-If you want to put it that way, then you’ve gotten more handsome, too. You’re stronger, and taller, and more manly, and accepting of others, and... umm...” Celia started to say as she looked up at Rio, intending on getting revenge for his words. However, she gradually grew more embarrassed and ended up blushing once more, until she breathed a weak groan.

“Uugh...”

Burying her face in Rio’s chest once more, she clutched at his clothes. With how close she was clinging, she could clearly hear the *thump, thump* of Rio’s heartbeat. It was warm, reassuring, and very comfortable. Celia wanted to stay like that forever.

“Erm, thank you very much,” Rio said shyly. Then, after losing herself to Rio’s warmth, Celia returned to her senses with a gasp.

“Ah, yeah. I-I really am glad we were able to safely reunite. Well done coming back, and let’s leave it at that!” she said in a high pitched voice, her body shaking.

“Yes,” Rio said happily, giving a firm nod. However, his expression soon fell. “...I heard the news, Professor. You’re getting married.”

For an instant, Celia’s eyes wavered with sadness, before she soon crafted a fake smile with all her might and agreed. “Ah... yeah. That’s right.”

Seeing Celia like that made Rio take another step forward. “I heard your husband is to be Charles Arbor.”

“Y-You know about that, too?” Celia avoided Rio’s gaze

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timidly.

"...I apologize for being so blunt, but is this a marriage that you desired, Professor?" Rio got straight to the point with an utterly serious expression.

"Eh, no... Umm... Why so straightforward?" Celia gave a vague reply tinted with guilt and redirected a question back instead.

"I'm sorry, I know that I'm being awfully hasty. However, knowing that there isn't much time until your wedding, and that Charles Arbor is the husband, I simply couldn't wait around and do nothing. I didn't get here through the official procedures, either."

"...Huh? Umm, you couldn't possibly have snuck in here, did you?" Celia asked in disbelief.

"I did."

"This is currently the most heavily guarded area of the entire kingdom... If you really did sneak in, then that failure would reflect on all the knights and soldiers, and even the kingdom itself."

"There wasn't a problem with the security. I simply found a loophole catered to my abilities — it's not like just anyone could have walked in, so you don't need to worry about that. Both locating you and finding a way to sneak in took quite a bit of effort. However, since we're low on time right now, I'd prefer it if you could just give a summary of what happened..." Rio said, returning the straying conversation back on topic.

"...Yeah, you're right." Celia nodded meekly. She must have still had her doubts, but she agreed with him nonetheless.

"Back when I was still a student, I remember you poured all your passions into your research and held a rather negative opinion toward marriage. Of course, it didn't seem like you were completely uninterested..." Rio recalled, bringing up the past in question.

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“…Is that so? That sure brings back memories.” Celia smiled somewhat sadly.

“That doesn’t mean you couldn’t have changed your mind, of course. Many years have passed since I last saw you, so its definitely possible for you to have had a change of heart in that time. That’s why I know it may be pushy of me, but I’d like to know if this wedding was something you wanted from the bottom of your heart, so that I can give you my blessings, too,” Rio explained honestly.

“Ahaha… I mean, I did agree to this wedding…” Celia gave a bitter laugh, but she chose to use the word “agreed” rather than “desired” — intentionally, perhaps.

“Even if your husband-to-be is Charles Arbor?” Rio asked, observing Celia’s face closely.

“…You have a connection to him too, huh.” Celia averted her gaze from Rio with guilt.

Rio formed a hypothesis with the information he had gathered earlier. “Was your house in an unfavorable position? And then Duke Arbor’s family came along, forcefully demanding the proposal?”

“…Mm, that’s… a rather unfairly subjective way of putting it. Because I am a noble myself, some ties to politics should be expected when it comes to my marriage. But I’m aware of all that, and I accept it. I’m already of the age, after all… I can’t keep thinking about my research forever.” Without showing any trace of her situation as a human sacrifice, Celia easily deflected the question in a light tone. To convince Rio further, she gave him a gentle smile.

“…So you’re not going to devote yourself to your research anymore?”

“Of course I’m going to keep at it. I’ll be quitting my position as a professor of the academy, but I’ve been allowed to continue my research at Sir Charles’ home. It’s a very favorable condition for me, don’t you think?” Celia said cheerfully.

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“But are you really okay with that man?” Rio asked bitterly, his expression not completely satisfied with her answer. At that, Celia smiled faintly.

“You sure are bothered by that, aren’t you? To be honest… he isn’t my ideal husband. But I’m still a noblewoman — what’s best for me isn’t the only thing I can consider. I need to make a compromise somewhere,” she replied.

“Professor…”

“Besides, despite his demeanor, Sir Charles is a very kind gentleman toward the ladies, you know?” At those words, Rio felt an intense sense of opposition. However, Celia’s words of acceptance of Charles sounded convincing enough, which put a wedge between them; there was simply no room for Rio to insert his emotionally charged arguments.

Despite that, Rio refused to drop the subject. “That is… Is that really what you feel, Professor? I still can’t accept it.”

If Celia was truly fine with it and had really accepted it, then there would still remain a part of himself that stood in opposition. Was it because her husband was to be Charles Arbor? Rio wasn’t sure.

“…Then, will you have me instead, Rio?” Celia suddenly asked.

Taken aback by the question, Rio’s entire body flinched. “…?!”

“Will… Will you be the one to take me away somewhere and live with me for the rest of our lives instead?” Celia asked, her expression somehow fleeting.

“…If that’s what you truly desire, I will take you away from here, Professor,” Rio said, quiet but full of determination. At that, Celia’s eyes widened slightly.

“…I’m just kidding. Sorry, forget what I said. Just hearing that reply was enough for me.” Celia shook her head with tears in her eyes. Experiencing Rio’s sincere feelings like that made her feel very happy.

No. I must not drag Rio into this… Otherwise, he would…

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Ironically, Rio's words just now had solidified Celia's resolve even further, which was why she stifled the bitter pain in her chest and pasted on a smile of happiness instead.

"Even if I threw away everything and left this kingdom right this minute, I wouldn't be able to forget the family that I'd leave behind. Even if I went with you, I'd probably end up unmarried for the rest of my life…" she continued.

"Professor, I…"

"Listen, Rio. That's enough. Go on your way, now."

"But there's still time…"

"No. I'm having a bath after this, so the helpers for that will be here soon." Celia didn't allow any form of rebuttal.

"I have to prepare for the ceremony early tomorrow, after all. They'd normally come a little later, but they could arrive any moment, now. If someone appeared, I wouldn't be able to cover for you. The entire engagement could even be canceled if I was found alone in my room with a man other than my fiance."

"…" Rio grit his teeth and clenched his fists in silence.

"It… may be difficult for us to meet again, but if you feel up to it, and if it's possible… Never mind, I'm sorry. I'm glad I was able to see you before the ceremony. It's embarrassing, so make sure you don't come to the ceremony, okay?" Celia's expression darkened faintly as she spoke, but she put on a cheeky grin at the very last line.

"…" Unable to find words that expressed his emotions, Rio remained frozen in place. Celia, in the meantime, pushed Rio around by the back.

"Go on, get going. Or I'll yell… got it?" She pushed him into the room outside of the studio.

"I won't ask how you got in, but you can't be spotted on your way out, okay? Make sure you're out of here within 20 seconds of me closing this door. If you're still in the room, I really will scream, okay? Goodbye," She said, closing the door without waiting for Rio's reply. She felt as though she

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wouldn't be able to catch her breath if she continued looking at Rio's face any longer.

After that, Celia carefully counted down the 20 seconds before fearfully opening the door to the studio once more. There was no sign of anyone in the room.

"Has he left…? Wait. *Zona Revelare*."

Just to be sure, Celia used an ability to detect any reactions to magic essence nearby. A magic circle appeared by her feet, sending a wave of essence to search for any other magic sources in her room and the surrounding area.

"There's only the knights guarding the corridor… There's no one outside the building."

Celia suddenly looked toward the window connected to the terrace. Finding the lock on the inside left completely unlocked, she deduced that Rio had probably entered from there. She immediately locked it once more, letting the sound of the lock clicking shut echo uselessly in the room.

Tears started pouring from Celia's eyes. "…Thank you, Rio. It really made me happy to see you one more time. So long…"

She offered words of gratitude and a farewell to someone that was no longer present.

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Meanwhile, after Rio left Celia's room, he immediately met up with Aishia in her physical form and flew up into the night sky together.

"Are you feeling conflicted, Haruto?" Aishia asked, seeing the sour expression on his face.

"No, I don't think I'm conflicted… Maybe. It's more like I haven't fully accepted it yet."

"Why?"

"…Because I couldn't see what she was truly feeling," Rio mumbled in reply.

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“Then what do you want to do?” Aishia asked, inquiring about his true intentions.

“We’ll go watch the ceremony tomorrow. But first, I want to know more details about how the marriage between the Count Claire house and Duke Arbor’s house came to be.”

Because it didn’t seem like he’d be able to talk to Celia properly without knowing that.

“I’ll help,” Aishia offered without any hesitation.

“…Sorry.” Rio apologized shamefully.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I’m making you go along with my every whim.”

“I told you before — Haruto and I will always be together. As long as you need me, I will always be here for you to lean on. So… lean on me,” Aishia said, hugging Rio gently midair.

“…Thanks. I don’t want to impede our information search by causing a fuss, so we’ll proceed carefully. It might be a bit of a long night, but will you come with me?”

“Leave it to me. Let’s go.” Aishia nodded, taking Rio by the hand.

Their night had only just begun.

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Chapter 5: The Silver Bride

The next morning, Charles and Celia set up their wedding headquarters and prepared for the ceremony on the plains by the side of the road that stretched south to the outskirts of the capital city. The plan was to depart for the capital at noon from there; they would proceed into the capital city and head for the Great Temple near the castle that worshiped the Six Wise Gods, then hold the ceremony at the outdoor altar there.

At present, thousands of people from the bands and guard squads participating in the parade were gathered, along with friends and family visiting to give the new bride and groom words of blessings.

For example, in the groom's pavilion, a knight was leading a man wearing a pitch black outfit into the room. "Sir Charles, I have brought Mr. Reiss."

"Oh, Mr. Reiss. You managed to attend." Dressed in his extravagant groom's outfit, Charles welcomed Reiss with a wide smile.

"We are good friends, after all. I am more than happy to be in attendance; I'd like to extend my sincerest congratulations to your wedding on this occasion, Sir Charles," Reiss said with an empty and fake smile.

"Ah, thank you. When did you arrive in our capital?"

"I only arrived today, mere moments ago."

"I see. If you had arrived earlier, I would have given you a proper welcome, but…"

"No, no, don't mind me. Though we may be officially at peace with each other, I am still an ambassador of the Proxia empire. If I acted too friendly with you, there would be those

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who would find that most disagreeable. I'm essentially sneaking around this time, so please allow me to participate on the down low, if you will."

Charles frowned apologetically. "I am most grateful for your consideration. However, since you have made the journey here to the capital, it is only right for me to treat you as a proper, noble guest. Allow me to prepare a visitor room at the royal castle during your stay. There is no need to pay any concern to the eyes of a small minority. Please, come visit my home once the ceremony is over."

"Heheh, tonight will be your first night as a married couple, after all. How about I visit your estate in a few days? I'd like to personally give my own wedding present."

"Hahaha, understood. Then I will gratefully enjoy myself tonight."

"Yes, please do... Hm?" Reiss nodded with a smile pasted on his face, when he suddenly sensed something and moved his head slightly.

It was only for an instant, but I felt the presence of a materialized spirit just now. Is it within the capital? With this many people packed into one area, pinpointing it will be difficult. So as long as I don't approach carelessly, my presence shouldn't be detectable...

Reiss narrowed his eyes; his gaze was directed toward the center of the capital.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Reiss?" Charles asked curiously.

"No, it's nothing. I don't want to get in the way of your other visitors, so I shall head over to the Great Temple first." Reiss smiled.

"Then allow me to assign you a number of guides. If you need anything, speak to them." Charles said, directing a knight with a glance to do so.

"I am much obliged. Let us meet again later." Reiss bowed once at the end and left with the escorting knight.

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Looks like it'll be difficult to search around alone. Guess I should lie low for now, he thought to himself.

"Now, it's about time I went to visit Celia myself. You — call my wives here. We'll head to Celia together," Charles ordered a nearby butler.

"Yes, sir. Understood." The butler nodded reverently at Charles after receiving the order and left the tent with light steps. Charles huffed through his nose triumphantly.

"The day has finally arrived. I cannot wait for the night to come," he murmured, grinning to himself.

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Meanwhile, Celia was wearing her flattering princess line wedding dress as she waited idly on standby in a tent separate from Charles.

"Are you there, Celia?" Charles' cloyingly sweet voice sounded. There were knights posted on guard in front of the tent, so he was probably asking despite knowing she was there.

Celia gave a small sigh before smoothing over the smile on her face and responding. "Yes, I am."

Charles then immediately entered the tent. Following him were six women in dresses and six knights in extravagant ceremonious knight garb.

"...O-Ooh, how marvelous! This is wonderful, Celia! You're truly a beauty!" Charles praised Celia delightfully when he spotted her in her wedding dress. The women and knights behind him couldn't help but widen their eyes at her pure beauty.

The fabric of the upper body of the dress fit her perfectly and contrasted with the softly spread skirt, making Celia's already thin waist seem even more beautiful in silhouette. Furthermore, the combination of Celia's silver-white hair and pure white dress was truly elegant and divine, almost

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like the image of a winter fairy.

"Thank you very much, Sir Charles." Celia bowed gracefully.

"...It's wonderful, truly wonderful," Charles said, nodding several times before reaching his hand out to touch Celia's cheek.

Celia desperately stamped down the urge to flinch; she flinched once and turned her face away in embarrassment.

"Are you nervous? Don't worry. I'll be there."

"...Okay." Celia nodded with her head down. Her voice was trembling faintly.

"Hahaha, you must be rather nervous. I brought my wives along to help you relax, but... First, allow me to introduce the elite guards who will be escorting us in the parade." Charles spoke cheerfully, removing his hand from Celia's cheek and looking at the knights standing behind him. The knights had been captivated by the sight of Celia in her wedding dress, but when Charles' attention turned to them, they promptly corrected their posture.

"They're the gentlemen who guarded me during my stay at the guest house... right? I've seen their faces a few times before." They were all older than Celia, but only in their late twenties or so.

Charles turned to address them with a huff of laughter. "Ah, you remember their faces? Consider yourselves lucky, men."

"It's an honor," they replied happily.

"These men are the elite of the elite from the newly formed order that I serve as the commander of. They were formerly members of the Royal Guard, but were handpicked by yours truly. They're true knights, both in terms of family lineage and ability," Charles bragged smugly.

"So, they're the very best — that is indeed reassuring. Everyone, I thank you all for your work today," Celia said, turning a gentle smile toward the knights.

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The man acting as the leader of the knights placed a hand against his chest and responded proudly. “Yes, ma’am! We will ensure of Lady Celia’s safety, so please rest assured.”

The other men also nodded furiously with somewhat dopey looks.

“Hey, hey. I hope your protection includes me.”

“Of course it does. However, a knight of Sir Charles’ caliber would never make a blunder even if the unexpected happened, no? If anything, we’d be holding you back.”

“Hahaha, well said. You’ve got a good tongue there.” Charles laughed heartily.

“Shouldn’t you be heading back soon, dear?” A woman standing back addressed Charles.

“Hm, so I should. Celia, I have brought Tenasina and the others along. Use this opportunity to get to know them well, as I must attend to the parade directions now.”

“I understand.” Celia nodded respectfully.

“Good, then I shall leave now. Tenasina, I leave the rest to you. Take care of Celia.” Leaving those words behind, Charles left the tent with the other knights.

“Yes, do take care, dear. I shall make sure to have a proper chat with her.” The woman named Tenasina and the other women all bowed their heads quietly as they saw Charles off. Thus, the only ones remaining in the tent were the group of women, connected to one another by way of Charles Arbor.

When Celia met Tenasina’s eyes, a strange chill ran down her back, but she decided to invite the ladies to sit down first. “Umm, Lady Tenasina… And everyone else, too. Please, have a seat. Could you get enough tea and snacks for everyone?”

Celia turned to the attendant next to her and asked her to prepare some tea.

“Well, I suppose. I don’t intend on staying long, but I might as well sit down.” Tenasina took a seat with a blunt tone to her voice. The other women silently followed her,

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taking their seats in what was probably a predetermined order. Once she confirmed that everyone was seated, Celia moved to take a seat herself.

“You, remain standing there,” Tenasina ordered. “And you, attendant: after you’ve prepared the tea, go tell the guards not to let anyone inside for a while. Then wait outside yourself.”

“…Huh?” Celia and the attendant girl were both taken aback.

“Hurry it up,” Tenasina ordered with a voice faintly laced with irritation, making the attendant girl hurry out about her preparations.

“Y-Yes ma’am.”

Based on the mood in the air, Celia chose not to sit down, but remain standing instead.

“I believe we have met a number of times already, but I am the first wife, Tenasina. This will be our first time seeing each other as a group of seven, I suppose,” Tenasina began speaking, strongly emphasizing her position as first wife. The other women all shrunk back silently as they sat.

“I believe there were some girls here that were Celia’s classmates and students…” Tenasina said, looking at two girls who appeared to be aged similarly to Celia. The women present were all wives of Charles, but their ages were rather scattered.

In comparison to Charles being in his mid-thirties, Tenasina was exactly thirty-years-old. After that, the ages of the wives slowly got younger as they grew in number, and the girls who were Celia’s classmate and student were the fifth and sixth wife, respectively.

“She graduated by skipping years, so we only spent a short amount of time as classmates…”

“I-I’ve taken your classes before, Professor.”

The two girls answered timidly.

“Is that so?” Tenasina nodded shortly. At that point, the

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attendant returned to place the tea and candies on the table, before promptly leaving the tent. Once Tenasina confirmed that, she looked at Celia.

"Well, I'm sure you were in a higher position during your time at the academy, and your family lineage may be better than these girls too, but once you are wed to Charles, you will be the lowest rank among us as his seventh wife. Normally, it would be impossible for the eldest daughter of a count to be the seventh wife, preventing such a problem from occurring, but it seems you're particularly special... So I shall make everything clear here and now," she said bluntly.

"...Of course. I understand," Celia nodded obediently.

"An admirable attitude. You are special, but that doesn't mean you can disrupt the traditional hierarchy of the family. It would be a problem if you misunderstood this. We will obey Charles' decision to wed you, as it seems Charles has taken a particular liking to you, so you may be favored at first. However, we will not tolerate any insolent behavior. Make sure you do not even consider making a fuss about anything," Tenasina said harshly. The girl just beside her was also nodding along.

In other words, the higher ranked wives, including Tenasina, feared an issue over the subject of inheritance. Going in order, the second and third wives would have been blessed by a share, but with Celia and her high place in society potentially overturning that appearing, they were probably rather panicked on the inside. It wasn't as relevant to the lower ranked wives, but having Celia ranked below them gave more of a sense of superiority and prevented her from colluding with others.

It wasn't the kind of treatment a woman raised as the daughter of a high-ranked noble should be able to accept, both in terms of logic and pride.

"I understand, Lady Tenasina. And everyone else, too... I

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am inexperienced, so I would greatly appreciate it if you allowed me to join your ranks at the lowest position," Celia replied humbly, bowing her head at everyone present. If she had to live at this house for the rest of her life, then she wanted it to be as peaceful a living situation as possible.

However, Celia's reaction must have been unexpected to the existing wives, as Tenasina and the others all turned a doubtful eye toward her, most likely not believing that her words were sincere.

...I'll probably be picked on for a while.

Imagining her life from here on out filled Celia with despair. She was used to being alone, so she could endure a certain extent of ostracism from the family, but she had no one she could vent her feelings to, so her endurance would indeed have a breaking point in this situation.

On top of that, she had to offer herself to a person she didn't even like — whenever he wanted. If that life was to continue for her forever, who knew if she could really endure it...

Would it not crush her heart?

Would she eventually grow dependent on Charles?

Would it possibly change the person she has been until now without her realizing it?

With no salvation in sight, Celia couldn't help but feel incredibly scared.

Tenasina huffed through her nose unhappily. "Hmph, that's a terrible expression. I won't allow you to participate in the ceremony looking like that. You are still a bride of the Duke Arbor family, after all. Smile wider," she said roughly.

"Yes, ma'am." Celia forced a smile on her face. For some reason, she had trouble remembering how to smile, but she tried anyway.

"L-Lady Celia, First Princess Christina has arrived. What shall you do?" The panicked attendant girl came inside and spoke in a fluster.

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“Excuse you! What is the meaning of this insolence? Who said you were allowed to come in?” Tenasina raged at the girl. She must have been very flustered, as her expression showed realization of her mistake.

However, Celia paid no mind to that. “Princess Christina… Please allow her inside immediately.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” The woman left the tent in a hurry.

“Who allowed you to…” Tenasina furrowed her brow at Celia’s actions.

“…I’m sorry. But if we were to keep the royal princess waiting while we were talking among ourselves, wouldn’t that be an embarrassment on the Duke Arbor family name?” Celia offered her logical reasoning.

“Tch…” Tenasina tried to say something in an expression of her indignation, but sensing Christina’s presence near the tent, she put on a smile instead. Then, Christina appeared, having been guided by the attendant girl who had been waiting outside.

“Thank you for coming today, Princess Christina. I wasn’t expecting the princess herself to pay a visit, so forgive me if my reception is a little hasty…”

Celia left Tenasina and the others alone for now and handled Christina instead. She was aware she had basically secured Tenasina’s animosity, but now wasn’t the time to be concerned by that.

“No, don’t mind me. I chose to visit without any warning, after all. I came to give you a word of congratulations on behalf of my mother and father. Would you happen to have a minute?” Christina asked Celia as she looked at the group of women inside the room.

“Of course…”

“Please have a seat over here, Princess Christina. Go on, don’t just idle around, you lot move to the corner of the room instead. Celia, you sit there.” Tenasina drowned out Celia’s voice with her own, taking lead of the situation. After

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moving the other women, who had been frozen in awe, she ordered Celia to sit down and shrewdly took her own place next to Celia.

"...Thank you. Excuse me." Christina looked at Tenasina with a somewhat cold gaze and sat down.

"No, I am honored to be able to meet you at a place like this," Tenasina said in a flattering way, putting on a decent smile.

"There isn't much time, and I'd like to talk to my former professor alone. Could I have you ladies step out of the room?" Christina said, heavily hinting at how she didn't have time to deal with Tenasina and the others.

"...I understand. I'm sure you have much to discuss, so we will take our leave. Please, enjoy yourself," Tenasina agreed with an uncomfortable smile pasted on her face, then left the room with the other women in tow.

"You may leave, too. Stand guard outside and make sure no one else comes in," Christina said to the attendant girl, who stood unsure of how to proceed with her duty.

"Y-Yes, Your Highness!" The woman left in a hurry.

"How ridiculous," Christina sighed and muttered under her breath. "Professor, it's been a while... Now we can take our time talking leisurely. Won't you have a seat as well?" She offered Celia a seat with a gentler tone than before.

"Thank you very much. Please excuse me, then. There's some freshly poured tea ready here, so please help yourself." Celia thanked her and poured the tea, which was left sitting for just the right amount of time, into an unused cup. She offered it to Christina, before sitting down herself.

"Thank you. The wedding dress suits you very well, by the way. You're beautiful, Professor Celia... The women earlier cannot compare to you," Christina praised, smiling faintly.

"N-No, that's not true. I am aware that I may be lacking in feminine charms, since I don't seem like a mature adult." Celia shook her head, dismissing the thought as absurd.

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“I don’t think that’s true. I believe any man that chooses those earlier women over the current you is simply blind, Professor,” Christina said with a huff of laughter, making Celia smile happily.

“Ahaha, thank you. I’ll accept that compliment gratefully.”

“…Your face is looking a little less pale than when I first came in. Did those ladies say something unpleasant to you?” Christina asked while observing Celia’s expression.

Celia mustered a smile on her face, not about to complain. “No, nothing of the sort… I was just too nervous to sleep properly last night. But having you here has made feel better rather quickly. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, after all.”

“…Ever since Duke Huguenot took Flora away with him, Duke Arbor has been keeping a vigilant eye on me. It’s like house arrest, only under the name of protection. I haven’t been able to leave the castle at all recently, so it’s all thanks to you that I’m able to go outside today, Professor. Although there are countless supervisors acting as guards outside…” Christina’s face darkened with annoyance and she spoke quietly.

“…You must have suffered, too, Princess Christina,” Celia said, frowning herself.

“No, everything about my current situation is retribution stemming from the failures of the royal family… And those failures have shifted their effects to the Count Claire family and you, Professor Celia. I have no way of making this up to you, but allow me to apologize on behalf of the royal family. I truly am very sorry,” Christina said in a voice filled with shame, bowing her head deeply at Celia, who was taken aback.

“Y-You mustn’t do that, Princess Christina! The First Princess shouldn’t be lowering her head to anyone so carelessly! And I never blamed my current situation on anyone else… This marriage is something I decided on.

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There is nothing you need to apologize for, Your Highness," Celia said in a fluster.

"It isn't careless. That's how much trouble we have caused for you and the Count Claire family. While it isn't official, I will personally apologize as much as I can," Christina said, continuing to bow her head at Celia.

"But there isn't any reason you should be apologizing in the first place... There isn't anything to apologize for," Celia said uncomfortably. Of course, she understood what Christina was trying to say, because content-wise they couldn't discuss the matter any more specifically than this. If someone were to witness Christina bowing her head, or even caught a little of their vaguely worded conversation, it would be quite the problem. Christina most likely understood that too, but she continued talking.

"...I cannot say it clearly, but if I had to, then it's because your smile was snatched away."

"...Oh, don't say that. I'm happy, you know? I'm about to get married, after all," Celia said with a smile, unthinkingly reaching for her cheek with her hand. Perhaps she had grown unsure of whether her smile was coming across correctly.

"Back when I attended the academy, I really looked forward to your electives, Professor. Part of it was that the electives were the few classes I could take with Flora, who was in a lower year, but I genuinely did admire you as a person. That's why I used to watch you a lot. If my eyes don't deceive me, the Professor of today is like a bird trapped in a cage, and the Professor from back then was far happier. I believe you would know best why that is..." Christina said regretfully as she watched Celia's expression.

"Is that so... So that's how it looks to you. Ahaha..." Celia smiled sadly and avoided replying.

Christina stared at Celia closely. "It may not be of any salvation to you, but if an opportunity to regain your smile

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from back then ever presents itself to you, I think you should take that chance without hesitation, Professor. I can't do anything for you in my current state, and it may end up being an empty promise, but if you ever need my assistance, I vow to do everything in my ability to help you. Just say the word," she said seriously.

"...Thank you very much. There's nothing you can do for me, but I will pray from the shadows that you may reunite with Princess Flora once more," Celia said, smiling with just a small dose of happiness.

"...Yes." Christina's expression twisted apologetically as she nodded.

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The wedding parade began at noon time.

The parade squad entered the capital city from the main road to the south, merrily proceeding toward the Great Temple for the ceremony. Celia and Charles were riding on an extravagant horse-drawn carriage, surrounded by six horseback knights and enclosed in a neat outer ring of foot soldiers and musicians.

Charles Arbor had the smile of a leader as he waved his hand at the civilians standing alongside the road. Celia was also smiling at the citizens she met eyes with, waving her hand.

"Ooh, she waved back at me!"

"She's so beautiful, it's like she's sparkling silver. She's like a goddess!"

"So you can have such cute girls as wives when you're a great lord, huh?"

Most of the attention of the people was drawn toward Celia; everyone was captivated by her fantasy-like beauty.

"She's a silver bride."

"A silver bride!"

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“Hurray for the silver bride!”

“I’ll follow you forever!”

And so on. The nickname of the silver bride spread among the people. Charles must have heard the cheers of the citizens, as his mouth loosened into a smile.

“Oh? A Silver Bride, they say. Not a bad nickname for an impromptu creation by the foolish masses. Well, that just shows how beautiful and sinful you are. See? Take a look. Everyone is envying me for stealing your heart. It wouldn’t have gone this way with any other woman,” he said to Celia with an expression filled with superiority.

“I don’t believe that’s true…” Celia replied anxiously.

“No, you really are beautiful. Even now, my heart is stolen by you. I’ve never felt so passionate about a single woman in my life. Take pride in yourself, Celia,” Charles said, staring at her whole body with a heated gaze.

“…Thank you very much.” Celia’s body shuddered, but she was unable to move and remained standing there helplessly.

“Your every action strongly stimulates my male instincts. It’s a vast difference to those hard-headed, calculating women. Knowing that you’re almost mine makes it almost painful to hold myself back. I suppose I shall first enjoy our kiss of vows on the altar,” Charles said in a tone that couldn’t hold back his excitement, a smug smile on his face.

“…Yes.” Celia nodded, her heartbeat thumping unpleasantly. There was a hard to describe feeling of repulsion swirling in her chest, something different to nerves or anxiety. She couldn’t imagine kissing the man standing next to her and becoming a married couple… She simply didn’t want it. However, the moment for that to happen was almost upon her.

“Now then, it’s about time we set things into motion,” Charles murmured in satisfaction as he watched the excited civilians and sent a signal to the knights on horseback next to their carriage. The knights who received the signal drew

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their swords and raised them high into the air.

“Hail the Duke Arbor family! Glory to Sir Charles Arbor!” they yelled in a loud voice.

“Hail the Duke Arbor family!”

“Glory to Sir Charles Arbor!”

The other people in the parade started to chant too, along with the citizens within the general population. The shouting spread through the masses at a rapid speed until both the parade members and the general population were yelling extravagant praise for Charles and his house. Charles chuckled to himself.

“Are you surprised? The people are in need of a leader they can easily understand. That is what gives them happiness. As my father’s heir, I will eventually become that leader. And you will be my wife,” he said, smiling at Celia expectantly.

“…” Celia was unable to find any words to respond with. The only thing she could do was keep up the smile on her face.

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Meanwhile, a huge crowd of attendees closed in on the grounds of the Great Temple where the ceremony was to be held. They were all waiting eagerly for the arrival of Celia and the others in the magnificent outdoor garden.

A single road stretched from the entrance of the temple, continuing toward the outdoor altar where the ceremonial vows were to be made. The Great Temple itself towered over the altar a short distance away, and a party was to be held in the Great Temple and outdoor garden after the ceremonial vows were over.

Rio stood blending in with the crowd of attendees, Aishia resting within him in her spirit form. Only those formally invited were allowed into the temple grounds, but with over

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a thousand individuals invited, it wasn't that difficult for Rio to slip into the crowd. He stood waiting patiently for Celia's arrival.

Haruto, Celia is approaching. Aishia's voice echoed in the back of Rio's head.

So it seems. I can hear the commotion, Rio responded quietly. The noise of the music band and cheers of the crowd echoed from a distance, but Rio's heart was filled with silence.

Haruto, you're very calm, Aishia said in a flat tone.

It's because I was able to understand the situation properly. My head's cooled in the time that has passed, and I know what I want to do about it, too. It's all thanks to you, Aishia. Rio smiled gently. "Thank you."

All I did was some research. It was no big deal.

That's not true. If you weren't here, I wouldn't have been able to fully educate myself of the sequence of events that led to Professor Celia's marriage. I would have been lost.

Even if you were lost, you would have moved forward anyway, Aishia stated with no hesitation at all.

...Who knows. I'm a coward, after all. I may have run away. Rio's eyes widened faintly, hesitating as he gave a strained smile.

That's just part of being lost. Even if you get lost, even if you're wrong, you have the strength to move forward.

...Thank you. I feel a little more confident now with regard to what I'm about to do. Let's keep waiting... Professor Celia should be here soon.

Yes, let's wait. Aishia nodded. From there, a lull in conversation fell between the two of them as they silently waited for the parade to approach.

Some time later, the parade squad finally entered the grounds of the Great Temple with quite a bit of hustle and bustle. The visitors that had been waiting on the temple grounds cheered excitedly.

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The visitors in the temple grounds yelled at the carriage carrying Charles and Celia.

“Glory and honor to the Beltrum Kingdom sustained by the Duke Arbor family!”

“Hail the Duke Arbor family!”

“Glory to Sir Charles Arbor!”

Most of the attendees were nobles of the kingdom — nobles from Duke Arbor’s faction, that is — which explained why the mood was welcoming of them. Charles looked down at the attendees from the horse carriage and smiled with satisfaction. They must have all been faces he recognized, as he waved his hand at each one in turn.

Meanwhile, standing beside him was Celia, who despite having a fleeting smile on her face, was still acting as the pure and graceful smiling wife.

Professor… Rio watched Celia with a pained expression on his face. However, he had completely blended into the crowds, so Celia didn’t notice him. Rio wasn’t about to yell “Professor” out loud to attract her attention, so the carriage Celia was on proceeded until the middle of the road.

Haruto, should I go now? Aishia asked through their telepathic connection.

Rio took a small breath and agreed. …*Yeah*. *Please do, Aishia*.

Okay. As she responded, Aishia slipped out of Rio’s body, still in her spirit form.

Rio was unable to see her, but he was already aware of where she was headed, so he directed his gaze in that direction without hesitation. She was headed for the carriage, where Celia stood.

Celia was smiling, waving her hand at the attendees, when suddenly, her entire body flinched. “?!”

She glanced around at her surroundings in a slightly suspicious manner, before completely freezing in place. Her expression changed with a gasp, and she shook her head in a

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fluster. Then, her eyes turned to where Rio was blended in with the crowd, as though she knew he was there from the very start.

Her gaze wandered around shakily as she searched the area, but she eventually locked on to the sight of Rio's figure among the people. Rio stared fixedly at Celia, and when their eyes met, he smiled gently.

"Wh… y…?" Celia's mouth moved minutely. Then, her expression twisted with pain as tears started flowing out of her eyes.

When Rio spotted Celia's crying face, he turned on his heel and left the crowd of people.

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Just before Celia spotted Rio among the crowd…

Celia had eventually started to perceive herself as a puppet as she faced the parade, focusing on acting graceful and friendly so that she wouldn't mess up and bring trouble to her family. After all, the people congratulating her were all having fun and smiling with wonderful expressions. As she responded to them, Celia gradually felt as though she had been abandoned by the world.

Then, before she knew it, they had arrived at the Great Temple. At the end of the road, stretching straight forward from the entrance, were the stairs that reached up to the outdoor altar.

Next to the stairs were the VIP seats for people from inside and outside the kingdom. Among them were royals like Christina; the "King's Sword" renowned for being Beltrum's strongest, the commander of the Royal Guard, Alfred Emerle; and the Proxia Empire's ambassador who had a personal connection to Charles, Reiss.

Last but not least, standing below the altar just before the stairs was a single boy clad in hero-like clothing, his blonde

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hair fluttering in the wind smoothly as he gave a refreshing smile. He was between his mid-teens to late-teens.

Celia knew who he was; though she had never met him directly, she had seen him once from afar when there was a commotion over a hero being summoned in the castle.

He was the hero who had been summoned by the spirit stone held by the Kingdom of Beltrum — Rui Shigekura.

His facial features and hair color were different from his friends that he had been summoned along with. According to him, it was because he was “half-Caucasian.”

Rui Shigekura was waiting at the bottom of the stairs to the altar because Charles had arranged for validity of the marriage to be solidified through having a hero — a servant of the Six Wise Gods — give his direct approval. As a result, once the hero’s acknowledgment was given, there would be no way to take back the marriage.

Even as she smiled and waved in a friendly manner, Celia cowered at the reality looming closer before her.

Celia. An unfamiliar girl’s voice suddenly sounded in Celia’s head.

“?!” Celia trembled with a start.

I’m currently talking to you by directly connecting to your mind. There’s no time, so don’t be afraid. The unknown girl suddenly started to speak.

W-Who are you? Celia looked around dubiously.

My name is Aishia. Haruto… No, Rio asked me to talk to you like this.

Celia froze. *R…Rio?*

Look toward the back on your left.

Celia’s expression changed with a gasp as she looked in the direction as told. *Don’t tell me…?!*

A little further in front… Yes, around there.

Celia moved her gaze, checking each and every face of the people standing among the crowd. …*Rio*. Celia spotted Rio blending in with the masses. He smiled gently at her.

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“Why…?” He had come. Even though she told him not to… Even though she hadn’t wanted him to. Even though he was the only one she didn’t want to have witness the sight of her being married to Charles.

Unable to look directly into Rio’s face, tears started escaping from Celia’s eyes before she knew it. Even though she knew she shouldn’t cry, her tears wouldn’t stop.

“…Hey, hey, what’s the matter, Celia? Have you been moved to tears with happiness?” Charles was taken aback by the sudden sight of Celia’s tears. He questioned her curiously.

Just go along with him, Aishia’s voice echoed.

Celia faltered, rubbed her eyes furiously, and answered Charles. “…Ah, umm, I’m not sure. There’s happiness, and a lot of other emotions, mixed together.”

It wasn’t a remark she made thinking that she had to obey Aishia’s orders. If anything, they were words her confused head had blurted out.

They were her real feelings.

Happiness at seeing Rio’s face again, anger at how he came when she told him not to, repulsion at how she was seen on display next to a man she didn’t even like, and a complicated mix of other emotions, too.

Even so, the most prominent emotion occupying Celia’s chest was happiness from seeing Rio’s face. She had believed they would never meet again after she pushed him away, yet she was unbearably happy at seeing Rio’s face again.

“Fufufu, is that so. So you wanted to be with me that much…” Charles misinterpreted Celia’s emotional state in a way that was convenient for himself and leered in a smile that was filled with narcissism. “Come now, Celia. Don’t be so down. Everyone is watching,” he encouraged, playing the good husband.

It wasn’t that rare for a new bride and groom to burst into emotional tears during the ceremony, so the attendees

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watched over Celia with gentle smiles.

This is a good act. That must be how much Celia is delighted to be wed to me. Charles chuckled, pleased with himself as he looked out over the attendees gathered around them. As he did that, the horse that drew the carriage they were riding on neared the stairs of the altar.

Here, Celia finally raised her head after crying for some time. She wiped her tears and looked toward the point where Rio had been standing earlier, but he was already nowhere to be seen.

...*Huh? Where's Rio?* Celia's gaze wandered in a panic.

Hey, umm... Aishia? Can you hear me? she asked within her head, but there was no reply.

Hey, can you hear me? Where did Rio go? Celia asked with a pale face, but there was still no reply from Aishia.

Was it... an illusion? But that can't be...?! Celia suddenly felt very anxious. Feeling fear from Rio's disappearance, she glanced around at the attendees to the rear, searching for him.

"Celia, we'll soon be where the hero is." Before she knew it, the horse drawn carriage Celia had been on had arrived at the stairs where the hero was waiting. It stopped a bit of distance away from Rui, and the knights on guard moved to attach a staircase to the end of the carriage. They would be moving on foot from here.

"All right, let's get down," Charles said, extending a pompous hand to Celia.

"Who are you?! Freeze!" A foot soldier that had been protecting the rear of the horse carriage suddenly raised his voice. The squads in the parade instantly became noisy. The attendees of the ceremony also made a commotion, turning their eyes to what was happening in the squads that formed the rear of the parade.

"What's happening?!" The squad leader that had been guarding the front of Celia's carriage yelled toward the rear

from horseback. From the carriage, Celia also turned to look back in a panic. “I-Intruder! He suddenly slipped into our squad!” a panicked reply came from behind.

“Huh?” Celia witnessed a shadow weave through the crowds, closing in on the carriage. The horseback squad leader beside her also seemed to notice the black shadow.

“S-Spread to the side and form a single wall! Don’t let him approach!” he ordered in a fluster. The soldiers in the area hurriedly got into formation, forming a single horizontal line as a human wall, bracing the lances in their hands.

Meanwhile, the black shadow continued to weave in and out of the squad, steadily heading for the wall of soldiers. After the figure was at a certain distance to the carriage, he stepped out into an area that the soldiers had left open.

“Sorcerer Squad, apprehend him!” the leader of the knight squad ordered the sorcerers that were included in the parade. The sorcerers moved quickly, pointing their staves through the gaps between the soldiers forming the human wall and chanting to cast an offensive subjugation spell.

“*Photon Projectilis!*”

Immediately, magic circles of light drew the spell formula in the air at the tip of the staves, shooting an endless amount of photon bullets toward the black shadow. At the same time, attendees standing at the side of the road started to scream. Imagining what would happen next would have some people avert their eyes, whereas some gaze heatedly at the sudden commotion.

“Wha?!” Everyone present was struck dumbfounded. The black shadow skillfully stepped from left to right, lightly evading the rush of light bullets. Then, once he was several meters away from the wall of soldiers, he leapt high into the air and easily crossed over the top of their heads.

“H-He jumped?!”

The improvised line of defense broke into chaos, greatly reducing the number of soldiers obstructing the black

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shadow from the carriage Celia was on. The black shadow landed on the ground in a squat to kill the force of impact and came to a stop ten or so meters before the carriage where Celia and Charles were, adjusting his stance. His isolated figure was clearly one of a human, but a black overcoat covered his whole body and the hood was carefully covering his whole face.

"W-What physical ability..." The soldiers in the area swallowed their breaths in fearful awe.

The depths of the black shadow's hood stared straight at Celia. Celia's gaze was also drawn into the depths of the hood, and she widened her eyes in shock.

The black shadow immediately adjusted his hood to secure it and started running.

The squad leader protecting the carriage snapped back to his senses first and gave orders to the other knights. "Protect the two of them! Get down from your horses! *Augendae Corporis!*"

"*Augendae Corporis!*" The other knights also returned to their senses and chanted the spell, jumping from their horses.

"You, slow him down!" the squad leader ordered the few remaining foot soldiers standing in the way in a harsh tone. He must have realized they were no match for the figure, as his orders were a roundabout way of asking them to buy time instead.

The nearby soldiers attacked the black shadow in a fluster, but sure enough, they were nothing more than an annoying obstacle to him. The soldiers had bought enough time for the knights to get into battle positions.

"Draw your swords! Surround him and capture him! I don't mind if you take off an arm or two while you're at it. We'll teach this ruffian who thinks he can intrude on this glorious ceremony a thing or two about this kingdom's prestige! Let's go!" the knight leader declared loudly as he

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pointed his sword at the black shadow, and the knights began their counterattack with perfect movements.

The leader and another knight hovered in the back to watch out for his leap, while the remaining four knights surrounded the black shadow and attacked him. Seeing that scene made Celia tremble with fear.

Charles looked at the black shadow with eyes that hid none of his disdain and spoke to Celia with strong confidence. “It’ll be all right, Celia. Like I said before the ceremony, they are the elite of our kingdom’s elite. Both their lineage and abilities have been proven to be true.” It showed how much faith he had in his subordinates.

“There’s no way the likes of a lawless bandit could overpowe… What?!” Charles’ mouth fell open in shock as he witnessed what was unfolding before him. Celia’s eyes also widened in astonishment.

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The black figure showed no sign of cowardice as it took on six knights unarmed.

“Don’t underestimate me!” The four knights in front raged at the unarmed black figure, each exerting more strength into the hands that gripped their swords. They judged the space between them and tried to receive him from the front and sides.

“Wha… Gah?!” Of the two knights in the front, the one on the left was suddenly attacked without warning. The knight felt the gold armor protecting him bend before he was easily blown away, flying several meters. The display of speed and abruptness of the surprise attack left the three remaining knights in the circle formation frozen for a moment.

The black figure did not let that moment of weakness escape him. He stopped the sword the knight to the left tried to swing with his bare hands, then dispersed that kinetic

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energy as he twisted the blade sharply. When the knight unthinkingly let go of his sword, he immediately stepped forward and kneed him in the stomach.

“Guh?!” In no time at all, the second knight was blown back and sent flying through the air. Immediately after, the black figure turned and ran toward the two remaining figures.

“I-I’ll back you up!” The two knights who had been standing to the rear as backup hurried to join the front guard in a panic, but the black figure had already reached the two knights in the front.

The intruder carelessly closed the gap between them, but the two knights in the front guard no longer hesitated to swing their swords.

“Guh…” The black figure saw through the trajectory of the two knights’ slashing attacks and leaped boldly to avoid them, closing in on one of the knights and landing a kick to knock his opponent out in one blow.

“Gah…” In response, the remaining knight swung his sword vertically downward in an attempt to counterattack, but the black figure veered to the right to evade the sword and released an interrupting thrust with his fist. The knight was blown away, rendered incapable of combat like the other front guard knights.

Now, the only remaining knights were the two who had been standing by as backup. Seeing how the four front guard knights were wiped out before they could join them, the knights slowed down dramatically.

The black figure adjusted his hood more securely and broke into a run. He was headed for the carriage behind the two knights — where Celia was.

“Here he comes!” The knight squad captain, who had been in the rear guard, braced himself to block the black figure’s way.

“Haaah!” the other rear knight yelled as he started

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running. He passed the knight squad captain and went straight for the black figure.

“Fool, stop!” The knight captain yelled at his charging subordinate in a fluster. But it was too late.

The black figure jumped toward the charging knight and turned in the air to evade the knight’s attack, before tangling his legs around the opponent’s neck.

“Wha?!” The knight with his neck twined immediately lost his balance from the force and weight of the black figure. The black figure used the momentum of his jump to steal control of the knight’s posture and whip him around, throwing the knight’s body at the knight captain in front of him.

“Kuh?!” The knight captain leaped to the side in a panic, evading the body that came flying. However, the black figure used that time to land on the ground and adjust his posture, immediately closing in on the knight captain and launching an elbow strike on him. The knight captain was blown away; he rolled on the ground, groaning.

Only a few moments had passed since he had come in contact with the knight guards, but there was no one left standing in the way between the black figure and the carriage Celia was riding on.

The black figure did not pass up on the opportunity to run toward the carriage once more. He leaped high in front of the carriage and landed gracefully right before Celia and Charles. “Y-You— Gah, hah?!” Charles went to punch the black figure, but he was easily thrown against the carriage floor. This left Celia and the black figure as the only ones standing on the carriage.

“Ah, umm… Huh?” Celia cowered where she stood, when the black figure took a knife out of his pocket. Then, he pinned her arms behind her back and held the knife to her neck.

“What?!” Those that witnessed the sight all gasped in

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terror. Celia was also unaware of what was going on, making her curl into herself even further.

“Y-You! Release Celia! What— Gah!!” When Charles noticed that Celia had been taken hostage, he yelled in shock. However, the black figure kept Celia held close as he stepped on Charles’ back, and with the impact of hitting his chest when he was thrown, Charles started coughing halfway.

“Celia, dear! Hey, someone save my daughter!” Celia’s father, Roland Claire, jumped up from his position in the family seating area near the stairs leading to the altar and yelled, expression paling.

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“Tch, that fool, bringing shame to the family…” Duke Arbor came over too, twisting his face in annoyance at the disgraceful sight of his son.

“W-Wait, please! It’s too dangerous. Don’t provoke the bandit!” The soldiers hurried to halt Count Clare and Duke Arbor in their steps.

“Argh, release me! Didn’t you tell me your security measures were perfect?!” Roland wailed, breathing roughly. In the meantime, the black figure confirmed the situation around them through his hood.

Professor Celia — it’s me, Rio. I apologize for the fuss, but I wanted to take the chance to talk to you while our surroundings are doused in confusion. If you could remain silent for a moment, I would greatly appreciate it, he spoke to Celia through telepathic spirit arts.

“?!” Celia gasped and stiffened in the face. However, she seemed to have built some resistance to the shock of telepathy through her encounter with Aishia earlier, as she seemed to accept the situation without much of a reaction. She waited for Rio’s words with a worried look.

First of all, I am communicating to your mind through a method called telepathy. This cannot be used without direct contact with the other, so please remain restrained like this for a while. It’ll act as a control to our surroundings too. If you think your thoughts strongly and clearly, they’ll reach me too, so if you have any questions… Rio began to explain to Celia while being wary of their surroundings.

So it really was your doing, wasn’t it?! What is the meaning of this?! Celia questioned Rio without a moment’s hesitation. But before Rio could respond, Charles grew tired at their feet and started to make a fuss.

“Y-You! How long do you intend on using me as a footrest?! Who sent you? What do you want?!”

Rio sighed quietly. “Silence. I have a vendetta against you. I’m considering my options right now, and I don’t mind

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simply crushing your spine like this, honestly," he said, putting more force into the foot on Charles.

W-Wait, Rio?!

Don't worry — I won't kill anyone. It's an act to make a distraction, because he's a bit nosy.

Y-Yeah… Celia nodded timidly at Rio's explanation.

"Ngh…" Charles must have sensed how the weight on his back was threatening his life and immediately fell silent.

Meanwhile, the surroundings were in extreme chaos, with people trying to evacuate the attendees while also trying to surrounding the horse carriage. However, they appeared to fear for the safety of Celia and Charles who had been taken hostage, as they didn't try any bold actions.

Rio decided to take that time to continue his explanation. *There's no time, so let me say this quickly: I want to hear what your true feelings are one more time, before you get married. That is why I have come,* he said flatly.

Wh-What do you mean, "that is why"? What are you thinking, doing something like this?! You'll be captured, you know!! Celia yelled in her head in a panic.

I said I wanted to hear what your true feelings are, Professor. Even so, Rio showed no sign of impatience as he spoke in a firm tone.

T-That's… I told you, I… Pressured by Rio's determination, Celia's face fell with chagrin.

You can't fool me. I came here knowing roughly the whole story behind this political marriage. About how the Count Claire house was placed under a certain suspicion, which the Duke Arbor house half threatened. I understand why you were put in this situation, Professor.

Huh?! W-Where did you hear that?! Celia gasped, her expression changing.

I crossed a dangerous bridge… But none of that matters right now. Rio dismissed her question curtly.

I-It should matter… There were many things she wanted

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to ask about in that short exchange just now, but Rio's forceful attitude rendered Celia speechless.

...Won't you tell me, please? Assuming there was no need for you to sacrifice yourself, would you still want to marry this man, Professor? That's all I wanted to ask, Rio asked smoothly as he looked down at Charles below him, almost as though he could see right through Celia's heart.

What will you do... after I answer? Celia asked in a weak and timid way.

If you so desire, I will bring this wedding to a halt. Just like how you readily accepted this political marriage, I readily accepted my choice to do that before coming here, Rio said with determination.

...You're being too overbearing.

I am fully aware of how overbearing and forceful I'm being. I've already overstepped that line by interfering with your wedding in the first place, Professor.

If you understand that much, why... Why are you doing such a thing? Celia asked timidly.

Because I couldn't accept it. You're important to me, Professor — if I hadn't come today, at this moment, I would have regretted it for the rest of my life. I don't want to lose the people who are most important to me without doing anything about it... I've already lost important things to me and regretted it quite a bit. Once something is lost, you can never get it back, but... there's still time before you lose it. Rio's declaration was almost gallantly self-centered.

...! For some reason, Celia felt a certain weight to it; Rio's words deeply resonated in her chest. *I am unable to just sit back and watch as your dignity is trampled on for the rest of your life, Professor. Will you eventually become happy in this marriage? If you can tell me that you will, I will quietly leave this place. I'll never appear before you again,* Rio said simply.

If Celia had the resolution and confidence to assert that

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she would be happy, then Rio was just as ready and determined to back away. But if she faltered… Well, that was a different story. It was an overbearing and forceful approach, but Rio would have it his way.

That's…! Celia was clearly faltering.

You're hesitating, Professor. That's what it looks like to me, Rio declared bluntly.

B-But it may just be that my thinking process is wrong. I may cause so much trouble for other people if I prioritized my own feelings… Is that really the right thing to do?! Celia said, desperately appealing for her own indecision. In a way, she was confessing her true thoughts about how she didn't want this marriage to happen in a somewhat roundabout way.

Rio showed the faintest hint of a smile and shook his head. *…I do not know. However, if this marriage really was the right thing to do, then you wouldn't be making that face, Professor.*

Um… Celia's heart was struck deeply by his words, as her face distorted on the verge of tears.

Professor, please tell me. I will grant your wish; even if it's a forceful way of doing it, I have acquired enough power to see it through. So, please… don't give up, Rio said reassuringly.

What's… with that… Even Celia couldn't help but laugh bitterly, as though she was astounded by his words. *If I said I didn't want to get married, what would you do?* she asked weakly.

…I'd kidnap you and run away from here. I don't know if the Count Claire house's position will rise because of it, but at the very least, it won't cause them to be pursued for responsibility. With the bride being kidnapped before the general public, the cancellation of the wedding would be inevitable. There would be no logical way to put that blame on the Count Claire family. If anything, the responsibility

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would fall on the shoulders of the security, which would result in Duke Arbor's family receiving the brunt of the criticism, Rio explained.

You've already made this much of a mess of the situation… It seems you really do have the confidence to be able to pull something like that off, Celia said, biting on her lower lip. She didn't feel any doubt toward Rio's statement about kidnapping her, but her expression showed faint hesitation. She must have felt guilt at the idea of abandoning her responsibilities to her family and the noble society after all.

Rio seemed to see through those worries of hers. *Don't you think you've already fulfilled the bare minimum of your original goal of marrying Charles, Professor? Of course, you'll be isolating yourself from your family and the noble society if you leave this kingdom, but I will assist you as much as possible to reinstate your noble status and reunite you with your family, if you so wish,* he said. Even if Celia were to be kidnapped here, a certain level of social connection had already been formed between the two families, and though it wasn't impossible, it would definitely be difficult for the Arbor family to abandon the Claire family at this point.

Ahaha… to run away from here and then try to restore everything the way it was… isn't that a little too hopeful? Or rather, too convenient for me, I wonder… Celia laughed weakly without any confidence.

No. If it's you, Professor, it's definitely possible. You'll be able to put everything back where it should be, Rio stated in a certain tone. It was dazzlingly straightforward, expressing his trust and clear expectations toward Celia.

Celia was so happy she could cry; it was as though her gloomy heart had cleared up in an instant. She certainly felt like anything could be done in this very moment.

…That's all I had to say. It was a long-winded

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conversation, but in the end, your life is your own, Professor. Even if I choose to speak up against it, I won't force you to do anything. So, please — you make the final decision. Although… those aren't words I should be saying with a knife pointed at you. Rio smiled faintly.

Hey, Rio. Celia said, her heart having already decided.

Yes? Rio replied, awaiting her answer.

Take me away from here. All the way outside of the capital.

With that, the caged bird was set free. Those words were, unmistakably, Celia's true feelings.

Leave it to me. Rio nodded with determination, happiness flowing from the depths of his heart.

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Chapter 6: Against The Beltrum Royal Army

“I’ve decided,” Rio suddenly murmured to Charles below him.

“Huh?! D-Don’t tell me you plan on killing me?!” Charles’ body shook as he wailed in a high-pitched voice.

“No, you disgrace. I’m going to abduct this girl — she’s your bride to be, no?” Rio said, clearly provoking Charles, who turned bright red.

“Y-You! You think you can run away unscathed in this situation?!” he yelled in a rage. The carriage was already surrounded by the great army of the Kingdom of Beltrum; their numbers were easily in the hundreds. Once the reinforcements arrived, those numbers would multiply.

“Try and catch me, then. If you can, anyway,” Rio sneered, putting away his knife and lifting Celia, bridal style.

“Gah! Wait, huh…? Ah, u-umm… Sir Charles?!” Celia called in confusion, flushing scarlet when she was lifted.

“C-Celia?! Shit, you bastard!” Still being trampled on, Charles began to struggle in frustration.

“Celia?!” Celia’s father, Roland, yelled. He was being held back by soldiers, unable to bear the sight.

I-I’m sorry, Father. I will definitely come see you again… Celia’s face’s fell with sadness, but she mustered the best smile she could toward Roland.

“…What… Celia?!” All the strength drained from Roland, leaving him standing in a daze.

Here we go! Rio called out to Celia through telepathy, jumping down from the carriage.

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“D-Don’t let him get away!” Charles yelled in a panic, scrambling to his feet. However, Rio had already landed on the ground with Celia and was running toward the soldiers with their lances braced.

“Don’t move!”

“What are you all standing around for?! Move!”

The commanding knight and Charles both yelled in tandem. While the soldiers were confused at the contradicting orders, most of them reacted to Charles’ order and moved in on Rio with their lances ready. However, Rio steadily accelerated toward the soldiers that had fallen out of step without an ounce of fear in his steps.

“?!” Afraid, the soldiers with their lances at the ready eased up on their approaching speed toward Rio. They suddenly pointed the tips of the spears toward the ground.

“N-No! He’s going to jump over the crowd of people! Brace your lances!” The commanding knight yelled, but it was too late. Rio had built up enough of a pace to leap before he stepped within range of the soldiers’ lances. He easily soared over their encirclement.

“…W-What are you doing?! Are you all incompetent?! Get him already!” Half-dumbfounded, Charles yelled at the circle of soldiers in a panic.

“*Photon Projectilis!*” The sorcerers who had been on standby in a corner of the circle started chanting their spells and fired their photon bullets at Rio above them. However, the bullets did not make contact.

“Fools, don’t shoot! What if you hit Celia?! Chase them! Capture them! Use griffins to chase them from the skies! Mobilize the Aerial Knights!” Charles raised hell as he sent out order after order.

Rio who had easily leaped two meters, landed gracefully outside the circle of soldiers. It was a jump distance easily two times as large as a knight that had enhanced his physical abilities with magic, leaving the soldiers in the circle

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stunned. Rio took that chance to start running again.

Caught off guard, the soldiers simply watched Rio's retreating back. However, the Aerial Knights, who rode their griffins, responded immediately and began their pursuit.

"Listen up! The Aerial Knights have already began their pursuit. The entire army will now be mobilized to immediately encircle the capital. The transmission soldiers will first set up long-distance communication through magic artifacts and promptly spread the following information: the wanted is carrying a girl dressed in a wedding dress with a high chance he's in possession of an ancient magic artifact with ability-enhancing sorcery. A regular soldier stands no chance against him. Only knights that can enhance their physical ability should attempt combat!" the commanding knight yelled loudly to the confused troops, making the flustered soldiers return to their senses with a gasp.

"Y-Yes sir, right away!" The transmission soldiers also began to move in a flurry.

"Those present should continue to guard this area. For now, Vanessa, you will be left in charge. Coordinate with the squad leaders and position them well," the commanding knight said to Vanessa Emerle, the female knight beside him.

"Understood, brother!" Vanessa saluted him with a quick action.

Charles came over from the carriage and flared up at the knight in charge, Alfred Emerle. "Y-You! Alfred! What are you doing conveniently trying to give orders after you allowed the infiltrator to escape?!"

Alfred sighed quietly. "The one conveniently giving orders is you, no? Earlier, when I was sending orders to the soldiers under my command, did you not send your own orders and disrupt everything?" he objected.

"I-I don't recall leaving you in charge of the security on scene in the first place!"

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“Indeed, I believe that was you and your unconscious subordinate’s responsibility. With both of you unable to make the order, in terms of position, I judged myself most fit to take command.”

“Guh…” Charles must have realized he was at fault, as he fell speechless with a hateful expression.

Alfred ignored Charles’ blame shifting and moved the conversation on quickly. “Well, whatever. More importantly, did you gain any clues on the bandit’s motives? What is his goal?”

“…He said he had a vendetta against me,” Charles answered with a click of his tongue.

Alfred sighed quietly. “I see. Well, that leaves quite the number of suspects, then.”

“S-Silence! You should be pursuing the culprit, too! Go and seize him!” Charles yelled.

“That’s what I intend on doing. The prestige of this kingdom has been tainted as much, after all. Vanessa will be left in charge of this area, but I assume you will be able to take control of the overall situation from here, right?”

“Of course!”

“Then I’m leaving it to you. I’ll be going now.” With that, Alfred kicked off the ground and broke into a run. He hadn’t chanted a spell, but his speed was far above an average knight with enhanced physical abilities.

“Go already! Shit, shit, shit!” Charles shouted, stamping his feet on the ground without watching Alfred’s back. Because of this, he failed to notice the hero, Rui Shigekura, running behind Alfred secretly.

Meanwhile, in a corner of the garden among the gathering of attendees, the Proxia Empire ambassador Reiss watched the chaos on the temple grounds pleasantly.

While things have taken quite an interesting turn, this is quite vexing indeed. As an ambassador under their protection, it would not look good if I snuck away here. An

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assailant bold enough to attempt such a thing, and the spirit who never revealed itself… How interesting… Reiss sighed, lamenting the fact he could do nothing but watch in silence.

His interest was strongly piqued by the duo who had never revealed their identities — Rio and Aishia.

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Meanwhile, Rio was running over the rooftops in the noble district, heading toward the western side of the capital. As most of the nobility were attending Celia's wedding, the only people remaining in the district were the servants in charge of watching the houses. The security knights and soldiers patrolling the ground would spot him at times, but were unable to catch up to him. Only the Aerial Knights riding on the griffins could keep Rio within their sights, and continued to give chase.

H-Hey, wait, Rio! This is so fast! Aren't you going too fast?! Celia's head was spinning.

Yes. Just make sure you hold on tight. The griffin squad in the air is a bit of a problem, so I'm going to increase my speed a little more, Rio said, increasing the strength with which he was holding onto Celia.

A-All right! Celia replied hesitantly.

His body was more muscular and sturdy than she had expected, revealing the growth that had happened in the time since they'd been separated.

You've grown into a wonderful young man, Rio, Celia couldn't help but think out of happiness.

Thank you very much, Rio replied shyly.

…Eh, ah, did you hear that just now?! Startled, Celia blushed crimson red. She hadn't expected her sudden thought to be conveyed, so she wondered if she had thought something rather embarrassing.

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Ahaha, it's because we've been in continuous contact for so long, it seems like our sensitivity to each other has temporarily strengthened. So even if you don't think a thought clearly, it still gets conveyed.

Geez! Ah, hey… I wasn't thinking anything else that was weird, was I?! Celia started to make excuses for herself in a flurry.

…No, there was nothing strange.

Hey, what was that pause just now?

Haha, it didn't mean anything. Rio laughed in amusement.

Geez! Celia pouted her lips in embarrassment.

Have you gotten used to this speed a little? Rio asked out of concern for Celia.

Yeah, I'm fine. I've gotten used to it, so feel free to speed up all you want. Celia sensed that her earlier fluster had caused him to take more care and consideration around her, making her smile happily.

Then, don't mind if I do. Rio raised his running speed by another level.

Just how fast can you run? Celia asked timidly.

If I really wanted to, I could go faster, but that would require a flat path. This speed is perfect for running across obstacle-ridden rooftops.

I see. I wonder what kind of sorcery it is…

That explanation can come later. Even if we run at this rate, it'll take some time for us to lose them, so we're going to descend to the alleyways for now. There, I'll pass the baton and meet up with you later.

P-Pass the baton? Meet up later…? Rio's sudden explanation left Celia tilting her head dubiously.

That's the plan. There's a place I prepared in advance with my accomplice… She's actually the girl who spoke to you first, Profes… Oh, there it is. Rio suddenly jumped down from the rooftops. Celia curled up in preparation for the

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landing, but Rio used his wind spirit arts to land softly in the alleyway.

They were in an area for the upper middle class that served nobility, located relatively close to the castle walls that enclosed the noble district. The alleyway had been confirmed to be a dead end in advance, and with the closely packed buildings around it, it was difficult to spot from the skies.

“Aishia.” Rio hid in the shadow of the buildings and called out the name of his partner, who had remained in spirit form this entire time. The particles of light gathered to form the figure of a beautiful girl. At the sight of Aishia suddenly appearing, Celia’s eyes widened in shock.

“Wha?!”

“Aishia, take Professor Celia and get out of the capital, as planned. I’ll buy us some time.”

“Got it.” Aishia nodded once, taking Celia from Rio’s arms.

“E-Eh? Wait, what is the meaning of this?!” Celia protested from how she was being carried bridal style in Aishia’s arms.

“It’s exactly as I said. I’m going to become a decoy to buy us some time, so that you can escape the capital with Aishia. I’ll definitely meet up with you later, so don’t worry. As for an explanation about Aishia… Ask her yourself as you’re on the move. She’s trustworthy.”

“Eh, w-wait! It’s dangerous! You might be strong, but your opponent is an entire army…?!” Celia yelled in a panic to stop him.

“It’s fine. There’s plenty of ways it can be done in an urban area. Look after Celia for me, Aishia. I’d rather we concealed ourselves as much as possible, so if you fly in the air, make sure no one sees you,” Rio said lightly, before turning on his heel and walking away from the shadows.

“Yup, leave it to me.” Aishia nodded deeply.

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Rio glanced back and gave a short nod. Then, he smiled gently once more to Celia, who was trying to say something, before jumping back onto the roof and running off.

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After handing Celia off to Aishia, Rio resumed running across the rooftops like an acrobat. The Aerial Knights patrolling the skies immediately spotted Rio's figure.

"There he is! There's no mistaking it!"

"But Lady Celia is nowhere to be seen!"

The captain of the Aerial Knights gazed down at the alleyway Rio came from and analyzed the situation immediately. "Hmph, he must have gotten desperate after being backed into a corner. The alleyway he came out of was a dead end... Tell the ground units to search the area, including the interior of the residences. Signal flare!"

Then, around half of the number of patrolling griffins circled back and released a powerful blast of light magic from the air.

"*Signum Ignis!*"

Rio gazed at the griffins in the sky above and focused himself with a deep breath. ...*They called for reinforcements, huh? I'm not surprised. All that's left is for me to distract my pursuers in a noisy way...*

"*Photon Projectilis!*" The knights in the air all fired magic toward Rio on the rooftop in one go; a barrage of countless light bullets rained down on Rio. However, Rio moved about on nimble feet to evade the attack.

"I-I can't hit him!"

"Damn it, how stubborn is he?!" The knights frowned with impatience.

"Keep your wits about you. He probably has an ancient magic artifact with a powerful ability enhancer. We simply have to nail him down to one spot. In that time, ground

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reinforcements should arrive. Continue attacking," the captain in charge of commanding the squad instructed calmly.

"*Photon Projectilis!*"

Obeying their commander, the knights began to fire light bullets at Rio once more. Rio did exactly what his opponents wanted by lazily evading the attacks until the ground reinforcements could come running. About a minute later, the reinforcement knights — ten of them — arrived. The buildings were packed together tightly, but the roads were wide and allowed for a large view, helping the reinforcement knights immediately identify the alleyway Celia had been hidden in.

"There it is. Let's go!" The knight who seemed to be the leader of the squad headed straight for the alleyway.

I won't let you! Rio sensed the movements of the reinforcement squad and jumped down from the roof, blocking the way into the alley.

"Wha?!" The knights were taken aback Rio's sudden appearance. Rio did not allow that moment of weakness to escape him, charging at the knights before they could draw their swords. Caught off guard, the leader took a palm thrust to the stomach before the rest of the tightly crowded knights came under a one-sided attack. Thus, six knights were rendered out of commission in an instant.

However, the next group of reinforcements could be seen approaching in the distance. *I guess there really are a lot of them*. Rio took out two daggers from his overcoat and stepped back for now. More photon bullets started raining down from the skies above.

"...Whoa." Rio moved around in a zigzag pattern, evading the shower of bullets as he retreated to the alleyway, but the four ground knights took that chance to launch a counterattack on him.

In response, Rio stepped forward boldly and charged into

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the knights head-on. He swung the daggers in his hands to deflect the slashing attacks of the knights and twisted his body to land a roundhouse kick to one of them. He then widened their distance once again, using a hit and run tactic.

"Kuh! Don't give him time to rest! Our reinforcements will be here soon! Tire him out as much as possible!" one of the remaining knights yelled, exchanging looks with the other two knights and splitting up to attack Rio from three sides at once.

"Yes, sir!"

It was a tactic that placed their willpower on the line. However, even Rio was standing there resolved to fulfill his role as the decoy. He had no intention of backing down. Swinging his daggers, he skillfully deflected the onslaught of attacks coming from the knights.

Unwavering before his disadvantage in numbers, Rio knocked his opponents out cold with his blows — first one person, then two, then three; every time they crossed weapons. However, the next knight squad arrived with no time for him to rest.

It might be a little tough... to get out of this one without causing casualties. Rio's expression was grim. He hadn't wanted to cause any casualties in this fight because of Celia, but it was difficult to hold back and fight against such an overwhelming number. If reinforcements continued to flow in like this, he may need to resort to using his spirit arts specialized for group combat.

But I've already made my declaration. I don't want to do anything that'll leave a foul taste in my mouth at the slightest.

Rio didn't give up. He was the one who told Celia not to give up, after all. He had already decided to push his ideals through to the end, even if they were too perfect to be realistic.

"?!" Rio felt an unpleasant stinging presence from before

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him and suddenly stepped to the side. Immediately after he did, a flash; a light strike that would have knocked him out if it had made contact flew by, striking the ground behind Rio and cracking it.

That's… Far in the distance was a towering steeple, and on top of it, Rio could see a boy with a bow held at the ready.

That boy was Rui Shigekura — the hero that the Kingdom of Beltrum had summoned.

Rui seemed surprised that his sudden shot hadn't made contact, as he was standing there with his eyes widened in a slight daze.

It'll be a pain if he continues to fire this way from that distance, Rio thought calmly. For a moment, he considered revealing his hand and firing a sniping shot back with spirit arts, but there was no need for him to resort to that.

"That's enough. I will now proceed to apprehend you." A single knight stood before Rio's way. The knights immediately knew who the knight was, as a light sparkled in their eyes.

"S-Sir Alfred!" they called out.

…Alfred? That's the name of the King's Sword. He does seem strong indeed. Rio could immediately see that Alfred wasn't your average fighter. In fact, whether he intended it or not, he had begun to release an awe-inspiring aura toward Rio.

"The number of casualties would only increase. All of you — step back and ask the Aerial Knights above to give the hero my gratitude for his cooperation," Alfred said to the knights. He looked at the knights collapsed on the ground, before glancing up at the steeple in the distance where Rui Shigekura stood. Rui gave a strained but refreshed smile, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes, sir. Understood!" The knights behind him nodded promptly, creating distance from Alfred.

"Hmph…" Alfred closed in on Rio in an instant. Then,

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drawing his sword in one smooth movement, he started with a lightning-fast attack.

A sharp metallic clash echoed; Rio had stopped Alfred's sword with his dual daggers. The instantaneous offense and defense left the spectating knights gulping.

However, Rio and Alfred's battle had only just begun.

The two first drew back their own specialized weapons, then the next moment swung them again, exchanging blows of offense and defense too fast for the eyes to follow.

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Alfred's weapon had weight, reach, and more power behind each blow, but Rio challenged him with his sheer number of attacks. Rio swung his daggers to beat Alfred's blows to the punch, continuing to evade the sharp and heavy slashes. Every time the blades clashed, fireworks sparked and scattered.

Then, after they had exchanged blows for a while, the two parties paused.

...He's strong. His sword hand is good, and he has no trouble keeping up with my movements that are enhanced by spirit arts. Is there a powerful body enhancement sorcery imbued in that sword? Rio observed Alfred, analyzing his combat abilities. Alfred also observed Rio without letting his guard down, his expression looking somewhat dubious.

Immediately after, the two of them jumped at each other once more. The battle had resumed. From outside Rio's space, Alfred launched a vertical strike which Rio stopped by raising his daggers upward. The two powers struggled for several creaking moments when Rio pushed out his daggers and thrust Alfred away. Alfred suddenly backstepped away to retreat. Rio used the opportunity to step forward firmly and corner Alfred. Then, swinging the dagger like a dance, he ran freely around Alfred, attacking incessantly.

Alfred only barely managed to block the endless numbers of blows approaching him with his single sword. The knights in the area gulped as they watched over the fierce fight before them. The battle between the two had already reached inhuman levels of strength, leaving no room for third party interference.

"S-Sir Alfred is being pushed back..." The sword flashes of the two parties were already impossible for the human eye to perceive, but the knights beside them could tell that the exchange of offense and defense was beginning to lean in Rio's favor.

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The trigger had been Rio cornering Alfred. When they both put each other within reach, it was obvious that Rio using the flexible and multi-hitting weapon had the advantage.

If Alfred tried to swing widely, the moment Rio evaded him, a fatal opening would inevitably reveal itself. Since Rio had been attacking him persistently for a while now, Alfred was unable to swing his sword at will and was being pressed to handle Rio's attacks.

That being said, Alfred showed no panic in his eyes, using his long years of battle experience to move his body optimally, calmly waiting for the chance to counterattack.

Then, at one point, Alfred went for the match. While blocking Rio's swinging daggers, he first leaped backward to widen the distance from Rio. There, Rio stepped forward, immediately trying to close the gap between then. "Hah—" Alfred also stepped forward with force, accelerating as he charged toward Rio. The move backwards had been a feint — his true aim was to create an opening in Rio and land a sharp slashing attack there. However, Rio decelerated as though he had foreseen the counter, coming to a stop just outside of Alfred's reach.

"?!"

The next moment, Alfred's sword slashed through thin air, passing just a hair's breadth away from Rio's face. Immediately, Rio countered the counter by closing in on Alfred, swinging both his daggers and slashing from both left and right. Alfred's forward leaning stance created an opening that was by no means small. Rio's slashing attacks tried to catch hold of Alfred's body as though they were being sucked in. Alfred reflexively deflected the slash coming from his front left with his sword, then stepped left and slipped away from the slash coming from the right.

However, Rio turned his body, then used that force to strike Alfred with the grip end of his left dagger.

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“Kuh…”

Alfred promptly moved his left hand, which was equipped with a gauntlet, and directly stopped Rio’s powerful blow. Though he had avoided a fatal wound, he still felt the impact, a pained expression on his face.

Rio tried a followup attack; he pulled back the dagger in his left hand temporarily and rotated his body once more, swinging his left and right daggers at Alfred.

Alfred leaped backward to avoid Rio’s attack, but his left hand appeared to be injured, as he held his sword with only his right hand. Rio closed in from a low angle, when suddenly, Alfred’s sword started to emit a bright light.

“Haah!” Alfred slashed the glowing sword vertically downward, slamming it against the ground before him. The moment of impact caused a tremor and a shockwave to spread. At the same time, even though it was only afternoon, the surroundings were basked in a bright light. The knights watching nearby couldn’t help but close their eyes. Then, once they had endured the torrent of light and pressing shockwave, they opened their eyes just a bit.

“Wha…” The knights watching the scene were rendered speechless. The stone paving Rio had been running across moments ago had its ground bored deep in a wide area, kicking up a cloud of sand and dust. Before that damaged area stood Alfred, who didn’t see Rio in the area.

…I’ve been underestimated. Did that assailant have no intention of killing me? Alfred thought with a bitter expression. He couldn’t figure out Rio’s intention in pointing the grip end at him when it should have been the blade. However, no matter how much he wondered, his opponent was gone.

There was no resistance… Did he run away? But it didn’t seem like he ran into the alleyway. Where did he go? Alfred thought to himself.

“Sir Alfred!” A single griffin from the patrolling aerial

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squad descended. The other ground knights that had been standing by also swarmed over.

“I don’t see the bandit in the area. Where is he?!” The knight clearly had the same question as Alfred.

“I don’t know. Though if that attack just now was a direct hit, there wouldn’t be much left of him…” Alfred shook his head with a dark look.

“I-I see…” The knight nodded and gulped, looking at the deeply upturned ground. As far as they could see from the aftermath of the destruction, there was no way Rio could be alive.

Alfred put his doubts aside for the moment and prioritized the search of the alleyways. “All ground units will immediately conduct a search of the alleyways. Squads who come later should take care of the injured. The Aerial Knights will continue to search the skies. He may still be lurking somewhere. Do not let your guard down!”

“Yes, sir!” the knights all replied at once, immediately taking action. However, the knights were never able to locate Celia in the alleyways.

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Roughly one hour later, in a hillside area off the road that extended east from the royal capital of Beltrant, Aishia and Celia stood waiting. Celia was holding onto the hem of her skirt and watching the sky nervously, sometimes glancing at Aishia as though remembering her presence.

“Hey, Aishia. Will Rio really be all right?” she asked her for the umpteenth time.

“He’ll be fine.” Aishia nodded calmly. “…He’s coming,” she added, suddenly looking up at the sky toward the capital.

“Huh? How do you know…” Celia looked at Aishia’s face in surprise at her statement. Rio then landed on the ground softly, removing his hood and announcing his return as

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though he had come back from a leisurely walk.

"I'm back."

"...Huh?" Celia's eyes widened in shock.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, Professor. Everything is fine now."

"Y-Yeah."

"Thank you, Aishia," Rio said.

"No, I didn't really do anything." Aishia shook her head in her usual way.

"Now, shall we get moving? I'd like to get away from the capital as soon as possible."

"Okay. But where will we go?"

"I'd like to find some clues about the heroes, too, so I think we'll head toward the Galarc Kingdom in the east? If you don't mind, that is," Rio said, looking at Celia.

"...Huh? Ah, nope. The Galarc Kingdom sounds fine." Celia nodded readily.

Rio noticed Celia's awkward behavior and questioned her curiously. "Professor, is something the matter?"

"N-Nothing. It just hasn't quite hit me yet, so I'm wondering if this is really okay..." Celia replied with an expression that showed her heart wasn't quite present.

"...Do you want to return to the capital? We can still make it if we leave right now," he asked hesitantly, observing Celia's face.

"Huh? N-No, no, that's not it! Don't misunderstand! I was just wondering if I was really allowed to be so happy. It just doesn't quite feel real!" Celia denied Rio's misunderstanding with panicked gestures.

"Oh?" Rio tilted his head in question.

"Y-Yes... For a moment there, my future was so dark I thought my life was over. But now you're here and we'll be able to be together for some time... Just the thought is..." Celia said before she realized she was trying to say something extremely embarrassing and gasped, but it was

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too late to take back her words at that point.

"O-Obviously I'd be happy about this, don't you think?" she continued, averting her eyes.

"…Is that so?" Rio smiled happily with a noncommittal response.

"Y-Yeah. That's why… there might be some things that are on my mind, but there's no way I'll regret anything. If anything, I have to think about what to do from here!" Celia stated with motivation.

"Yeah. Let's talk about things slowly. For the time being, I have no intention of letting you live uncomfortably, so don't worry about that," Rio said respectfully.

"Ahaha, really now? But I want to repay you properly, too, Rio. Well, I only have this dress right now, but… I wonder if it'd be worth something if you sell it?" Celia looked at her silver dress and thought contemplatively.

"No, I'd never ask you to sell that. There's no need for you to worry about money. Just let me look after you for the near future. I am capable of doing that much."

"But… are you sure?" Celia asked hesitantly.

"Of course. Let me look after you, okay?" Rio replied jokingly.

"…Thank you. Then, I'll accept your offer and rely on you for a while." Celia grinned, bowing her head.

Rio nodded acceptingly. "Of course."

"Same here." Aishia joined in on the conversation, making Celia nod happily.

"Then, let's get a move on," Rio urged.

"…Understood. I'm counting on you for a safe flight, Rio." Celia held onto the fabric of her dress and stood before Rio nervously.

"Yes. Then, if you'd excuse me…" Rio nodded, lifting Celia awkwardly in the bridal style once more.

"Fufu, let's talk lots while we're moving to make up for all the time we couldn't see each other, okay?" Celia asked with

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a faint blush, but her smile was radiating brightly with happiness.

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Epilogue: The Cerulean Lady

That night, in a room of the guest building inside the Beltrum royal castle premises, the noble daughter of the Galarc Kingdom's great lord Duke Cretia, Liselotte, was eating her dinner alone.

"The business talk that was planned has been placed on hold, so it looks like our return to Amande will be delayed," Liselotte muttered listlessly.

She had been invited to Celia's wedding as a noble and great merchant of the Kingdom of Galarc, but with the ceremony suspended, she had been forced to stay in the guest house until now. Because the Kingdom of Beltrum was in an uproar over Celia's kidnapping, she had been forbidden to step outside under the name of protection.

"We'll be able to leave the guest house in a few days, but with the situation being what it is, please forget your work and allow yourself some time to relax," Aria, the attendant standing next to Liselotte, said.

"You say that, but there isn't really anything to do. The current collapse of the Arbor house is fairly interesting to the Galarc Kingdom... Or rather, something to be thankful for. You think the same, no?" Liselotte said with a giggle.

"It is indeed exhilarating to witness. Although, I *am* concerned for Celia." Even the usually emotionless Aria showed some conflict in her tone.

"...Who do you think the culprit is?" Liselotte suddenly asked.

"Considering the options, I believe it is very likely to be one of the opposing forces to Duke Arbor's faction."

"If that's the case, then I don't think she'll be treated

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badly, since there's still value in using her... But the number of people who could make such a mess is fairly limited, no? Would you be able to pull something like this off?"

"It may be possible for me if I had a powerful magic sword imbued with physical ability enhancement like an ancient artifact... But honestly, it would be a struggle. There would be a high chance of failure," Aria explained.

"Even someone as skilled as you would hesitate at the risk?"

"If I were to plan an ambush, it should be easy to gain the advantage and reach the carriage. The problem is how to take Celia and run away successfully. It would be one thing if the opponent only had ground units, but when the pursuers can cover the skies, it gets quite troublesome," Aria said, giving an orderly answer to the question.

"I see." Liselotte nodded, sighing in thought.

All of the kingdoms have been acting so shady lately. I don't know if its related to the incident this time, but the Proxia Empire in particular cannot be ignored. It feels like they're planning something big. While Liselotte wondered such things, Aria stood silently beside her, waiting for her master to speak up.

"Well, like you said... let's enjoy this short break and relax. Tell those who accompanied us here that they should rest once in a while, too. Things will get busy once we get back to Amande," Liselotte said, giving a small shrug of her shoulders.

"Understood." Aria nodded respectfully.

The Galarc Kingdom will have to work harder. The hero that was summoned in the castle, Satsuki Sumeragi, is going to be announced soon, too, Liselotte thought as she took another sip of her slightly cooled soup.

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Afterword

Hello, everyone. This is the most indebted Yuri Kitayama. I'd like to thank you all for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 5: The Silver Bride*.

Like the cover illustration depicts, this volume features the long-awaited full return of Professor Celia since volume 1. It took eleven months from the release of volume 1 to the release of this volume 5, but… personally, the time passed felt both long and short to me. Perhaps it felt much longer to those who were patiently awaiting Professor Celia's return.

However, I was only able to write volume 5 because of the ample space that volumes 2, 3, and 4 opened. The contents of volume 5 greatly differed from the web novel, but how was the sight of Professor Celia in her wedding dress? If you thought it was well worth the wait, then I would truly feel blessed as an author!

By the way, I'm currently in the middle of plotting out volumes 6 and 7. The contents of those will be vastly different to the web novel, too. Or rather, it may be best if you considered the light novel and web novel to be independent and separate stories developing in parallel worlds. For now, it seems like there's an announcement for volume 6 at the end of the book, so make sure you check that out!

Ah, that's right — thankfully, a character introduction will be added from volume 5 onward. Unfortunately, there are many characters that appear in this story, so I had it created laboriously and extravagantly. Hopefully it will be of use in triggering your memories.

One more thing: I have an important announcement.

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I mentioned this in the author profile on the cover sleeve, but the manga version of *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* has been decided! The wonderful character designs by Riv will now take life in a manga world. Just imagining it makes my chest burn hot.

I expect there'll be many new readers coming from the manga in the future, but I consider that to be all thanks to the readers who have supported *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* until now, as well as all the related parties that participated in the editing and marketing departments. I'd like to use this space to offer my sincere gratitude to you all. Thank you very much!

Just between you and me, I admire both Riv, who is in charge of the illustrations, and tenkla, who will be taking on the manga, so much. I am most obliged to them.

Furthermore, I appreciate all the love I have received from the readers as the number of volumes increases. My editors, and all other involved parties working where I can't see have really been so reliable. I truly feel so blessed. I would have never been able to stand here of my own power alone. I'm still a newbie, and I'll be working my hardest not to drag anyone else down, but I would greatly appreciate it if you continued to support me. Thank you very much.

Now, as for details regarding the manga version, I believe there will be various announcements made on HJ Bunko's official website and blog (it's possible that by the time this volume is released, some information will have been announced already), so please do check those out if you have the time.

Also, I occasionally tweet announcements and things on my Twitter account to my followers, so feel free to check there, too.

Finally, I still have some space left, so allow me to take this chance to tell a story from a party held by HJ Bunko the other day. I got the reaction of "Eh, you're Kitayama?!" from

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the people I met, but what kind of image do you all have of me? (laughs) I felt kind of bad for being your regular old average Joe. (laughs) Well, then — I hope we can meet again in volume 6. Please continue to give your support to *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles*!

— 2016, end of July, Yuri Kitayama

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Bonus Short Stories

At the End of a Long Road

In a world somewhere far away from Earth…

Rio once had his happiness snatched away from him unfairly, leaving him as an orphan in the slums. In his life without salvation, in a world without mercy, there was nothing but despair for him. There was no hope.

Despite this, he struggled through every day, no matter how unsightly it was.

After all… even if he had no hope, he still had a wish.

One distorted wish that he wanted to see through no matter what.

That single wish was why Rio wanted to live. Why he scavenged for leftovers. Why he begged on the streets. Why he endured all the violence from the strong.

Perhaps then, it was some twist of fate that Rio regained his memories as Amakawa Haruto, a former university student from Japan, and started attending the Royal Academy of Beltrum, a place of learning for royalty and nobility.

Rio gained an enormous power in acquiring knowledge and education. He was discriminated against, but it was a much better lifestyle than his days as an orphan.

However, there was no salvation in this world — even when he had turned twelve, he thought this way. Even now, he continued to hold his distorted wish within his heart.

And yet, despite that…

“Rio, Rio.”

Rustle, rustle.

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Rio opened his eyes a crack, raising his head. Apparently, he had fallen asleep in the self-study area of the library.

"...Professor."

There was a girl there, smiling gently. Her name was Celia Claire. She was five years older than Rio, the daughter of a count, and a genius sorcerer-lecturer who left her name in the history of the Royal Academy of Beltrum.

"Fufu, were you asleep?" she asked with a soft laugh.

"Yes, so it seems," Rio nodded shyly.

"Then how about we have a cup of tea in my laboratory? It'll wake you up."

"...I'd like that."

At Celia's invitation, the corner of Rio's mouth twitched upwards.

Rio, who had lost everything in the past, found happiness in moments like this.

In the middle of an unfair, irrational, long, and painful road, Rio found himself thinking that maybe there *was* salvation in this world after all.

Pet Pet

Several days had passed since Miharu, Aki, and Masato began living in the spirit folk village.

Rio and the others were seated on the sofa in the living room each doing their own thing. For example, starting with Miharu, the Earth group were earnestly playing a game connecting words in the Strahl common tongue to help memorize them. Aishia was leaning on Rio's right side and sleeping soundly.

"Onii-chan, Onii-chan."

Latifa, who had been studying by herself, suddenly paused in her studies to snuggle up to Rio on her left.

"Hm? What's wrong, Latifa?" Rio replied gently, moved his gaze from the book he was reading to Latifa.

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“Will you pet my head?” Latifa had a carefree smile on as she sought Rio’s affection. She would sometimes act playful with Rio like this; since it was normal behavior from her, Rio petted her head in a familiar manner.

“Ehe… Ehehe.” Latifa grinned happily, sticking her body close to Rio and rubbing her cheek against him like a needy dog.

Rio smiled and continued to pet Latifa’s head. The others present in the living room glanced over at them repeatedly.

“Latifa, Miharu and Rio’s other guests are here, too, so be a little more considerate of them.” The silver werewolf Sara cleared her throat quietly and warned Latifa with a scornful look.

“Eeh? But my time with Onii-chan is limited. And Aishia’s also clinging to Onii-chan, too.” Latifa pouted her lips and complained.

“L-Lady Aishia is simply taking an afternoon nap.”

“I’m only taking a break, too. Then I guess I’ll take a nap like this too.”

“Kuh…”

Unable to argue when an upper high ranked humanoid spirit like Aishia was brought up as comparison, Sara found herself at a disadvantaged loss for words.

“Mm…” Aishia stretched cutely and opened her eyes.

“Ah, were you awake, Lady Aishia?” Sara said hesitantly.

Aishia rubbed her eyes sleepily and nodded, before snuggling languidly into Rio. The movement was almost like that a graceful cat, natural and charming.

“Wah…” The high elf Orphia widened her eyes as her gaze was captivated by the sight of Aishia. The elder dwarf Alma was also staring at her fixedly.

“Me too, me too!” Latifa clung to Rio from the opposite side.

“Ahaha…” Even Rio was unable to move any further, closing the book in his one hand as a troubled look fell over

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his face.

“Geez…” Sara sighed sulkily, but the look she sent Rio and the others was somewhat envious.

“Onii-chan, pet me!” Latifa begged for Rio to pet her head. Rio complied.

“Ehehe. Ehehehe.” Latifa grinned as happily as ever. Then, Aishia who had been watching Latifa get petted from the other side. “…Haruto, me too,” she said bluntly.

“Eh?” Rio asked in return, taken by surprise.

“Pet me?” Aishia asked, looking up at Rio’s face from point blank range. Her clear eyes were very beautiful and held a power that was hard to say no to. Aishia would often cling to him out of the blue, but she had never requested for her head to be peted before. She may have been influenced by Latifa.

“…Umm, like this?” Rio hesitantly petted Aishia’s head.

“Yup, good.” Aishia’s mouth turned upwards gently. She normally didn’t show any emotions, but in this moment, her expression was very warm.

I’m an Elemental Fox, You Know?

Ding dong, dong ding.

At a private elementary school somewhere in the city, the bell rang to signal the end of lessons. The class of 6-1 wrapped up their end of day greetings.

“Stand! Bow! Goodbye!”

“Goodbye!”

Endo Suzune ran out of the classroom, letting her pleated skirt flutter behind her.

“…Hah, hah.”

Panting for breath, she took short and quick steps as she ran towards the school gate. Her goal was the bus stop beside the gate. It was the exact timing just as the bus arrived at the stop —

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Ugh, class ended a little later than usual today! Ah, the bus is here!

Suzune increased her running speed.

“Hah… hah… I’m getting on!”

She briefly paused to catch her breath and got on board.

There he is, the Onii-chan!

Suzune immediately cast her gaze throughout the bus and spotted the person she had been looking for.

His name was Amakawa Haruto, a third year in high school. He was an agreeable young man who had helped Suzune out two years ago, when she was still in 4th grade and had fallen asleep, missing her stop.

Suzune headed towards the back of the bus nervously, sitting down two rows behind Haruto. She wanted nothing more than to sit beside him and chat, but they were unfortunately not that that close, only knowing each other’s name and faces from that past incident.

Several months after Suzune had been saved by Haruto, another high school girl had started sitting next to him. She was incredibly beautiful.

She has to be his girlfriend, right? Yeah, she must be his girlfriend.

Suzune sighed quietly at the intimacy between the two. But she was okay with this for now; she was happy just being able to watch the Onii-chan she so admired.

The short ride together was over in no time at all, and Suzune got off at the stop near her house. Her house was only a few minutes walk from here, but today she was in a sentimental mood and wanted to walk more.

She purposefully took a detour and headed to the large park in the neighborhood. There was a walking path in this park, making it a popular spot for all kinds of people during the day, but —

Huh? There’s no one here?

Suzune was all the way inside the park when she noticed

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there was no one else around. Or so she thought, when —

BOOOM!

A tremendous noise roared.

“Kyaaah! W-What was that?! Are they filming a movie?!”

Suzune shook with a flinch and hunched over, glancing around at her surroundings. But there was no set equipment of the sort, nor any staff members. Then, after a moment, a girl’s voice could be heard from the skies above.

“No way, I thought the barrier was put up?!”

“...Huh?” Suzune raised her head timidly. There was a foreign-looking magical girl with silver hair fluttering about her. She looked to be around middle school-aged.

S-So they really are filming a movie. She’s even flying...

Suzune was completely dumbfounded by how unrealistic the scene before her was.

“Watch out!” the silver-haired girl yelled in a panic.

“Eh?”

BOOOM!

The moment Suzune tilted her head, another tremendous roar could be heard. Squeezing her eyes shut on reflex, she opened them to see the silver-haired magical girl, who had collapsed.

“Fweeeeh?! A-Are you okay?!”

Celia?! She thought she heard a girl’s voice.

“...Celia? T-This person here?” Suzune looked down at the silver-haired magical girl nervously, but she seemed to have lost consciousness.

Y-You... If you can hear my voice, pick up that staff!

“M-Me?! T-This?!”

Yes, quickly! Otherwise you’ll die!

Die?! She didn’t want to die. Pushed into a corner, Suzune picked up the staff as ordered.

W-What is this incredible magic essence?!

“E-Eeh?!”

A bright light flowed out of the staff, covering Suzune’s

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entire body. It made her feel like she was floating gently in an anti-gravitational space. Before she knew it, light of the staff had formed an outfit.

“A s-shrine maiden?”

Suzune has transformed into a magical girl wearing a fancy shrine maiden outfit. For some reason, she had fox ears and a tail, too, but she hadn’t realized it herself.

The life of Endo Suzune, a regular elementary school student, had definitely changed.

To be… continued…?

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